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A SOMERSET SKETCH BOOK

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A Somerset Sketch-Book

BY

H. HAY WILSON

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TO

PROFESSOR C. H. FIRTH

FORMERLY TUTOR AND LECTURER TO THE

ASSOCIATION FOR THE EDUCATION

OF WOMEN IN OXFORD

"You have fought so stoutly for us, you have been so hearty in counselling of us, that I shall never forget your favour towards us."

The Pilgrim's Progress.

Many of these sketches appeared in the *Spectator*, and are reprinted here by kind permission of the Editor.

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THE MENDIP COUNTRY

On the northern side of Mendip there is a narrow valley winding inland a long way, very little above sea-level; on the other side there is a wide plain, equally low, stretching to the sea, and in the middle of this the Mendip Hills rise sheer up like a wall into the sky. So steep is their ascent that looking across the valley you are inclined to wonder how any wheeled thing ever gets up there, and indeed how the houses manage to cling to the sides without sliding down altogether. The fairy-tales of our youth used to tell of a hill of glass which had to be crossed by the bold adventurer; in winter the sides of Mendip are rather like that enchanted mountain. And when you do get to the top, past the house where the bladder-fern grows, the place looks as if, though not actually fairyland, it were very near the borders thereof.

Mendip is a great tableland, bare and wide, a lonely, windy place of rolling fields and long walls of mortarless grey stone, and there is always a great deal more sky than anything else to be seen there, because until you get near the edge of the plateau you cannot see the country below at all.

It is an extraordinarily desolate place, shut away by its height and flatness from sight and sound of the inhabited world below, the world of towns and villages and ploughed lands and tillage and pasture. So great is the feeling of space and so intense the solitude that a wanderer there could believe Mendip to be that "place between the worlds" which the spirits of the old Northmen haunted after they went away from the life of men on the pleasant middle-earth. The solitude of Mendip is not like the solitude of the Lake Country, where peaks crowd in upon the traveller's eyes and dominate the landscape with their memorials of legend and history. From below Mendip, Crook's Peak is seen as a landmark, but that is on the lower side of the range, near Axbridge and the Mendip towns and civilisation. On the real top of Mendip, above the wild Burrington Combe where the Blackdown barrows stand up more than a thousand feet above the sea, there is no peak among the stretches of field and moor and broken land that rise up on right and left and repeat themselves in an endless succession bewildering to the eye accustomed to steer by crest or wood or such prominent landmarks as any other place affords. Crossing to Wells from the eastern end of Wrington Vale, you pass over this high part amongst the cairns and barrows and deserted mines without going through the splendid Cheddar Gorge that winds down for a mile and a

half among the finest cliff scenery in England. On this side there is nothing like the wonderful grandeur of the gorge, and there are no towns, and few houses; the landmarks here are memorials of the dead, camps and barrows of Roman, Dane, or Briton standing up against the sky on every rise of the land with the true pagan instinct for headlands and high places as near the sky as possible. There are deserted mining-huts, and the chimney of an old smelting furnace stands up stark and grim amid a desolation of furze and bracken and grey stones and broken ground, and higher yet the Beacon looks down on the long straight roads that cross each other at right angles, and seem to go away into space ever so far ahead wherever you turn. They really look as if they had no end, these Mendip roads that run straight like an arrow's flight between their low stone walls, or scanty hedges, to the farthest limit of the world, as it seems, for there is no sign of any other world visible up here on this lofty tableland which is three or four miles across. If you watch a miner coming deliberately from far off with his pick over his shoulder, you could almost believe he was coming to you out of some timeless land without change, and would go away past you once more into the unknown.

There is very little life to be seen in this deserted country, and there are few cattle and not many birds except skylarks. Some few villages there

are indeed, sheltering behind slopes, like Charterhouse and Priddy with its low church-tower. The bells of these places were in old days thought to have power in subduing evil spirits and demons of the storm, but it looks as though there could be no wide area of control here over the goblins of mine and quarry, and the house-spirits that are said to lurk for ever about bricks and mortar and any place that human creatures have once lived in and left. Most of the life of Mendip is underground, far below the thin surface-soil that bears little else but scanty crops of grass, low and thin and late-ripening, that give the prevailing tone of tawny yellow to the wide fields and invest the sombre landscape with an unspeakable charm when a whole great fieldful bows all at once in a long ripple under the wind. Heath plants grow here, and some field flowers, and a great deal of ragwort, its brilliant golden blossoms tracking the course of forgotten roadways or lighting torches in the gloom of rocks and spinneys. And willow-herb waves over the grey walls and covers stony places with its faint red spikes. But the wealth of the land is underneath.

Mendip is full of mines that were possibly being quarried when the Queen of Sheba came to see King Solomon, and even before that. Lead and tin and zinc all lie in rich store near the surface of this stony, barren land. Pigs of lead have been dug up stamped with the names of Roman

Emperors, and these are modern in comparison with traces of a still older civilisation that visited the land and worked the mines generations before Rome taught Britain the arts of peace, and laid roads across these hills, of which tracks are still visible. These roads bound together the Roman cities and villages of the plains, and cast into disuse the older roads that had united the hill-forts of Britons and earlier races. The old ways went out of fashion. Dolbury and Maesbury frowned down deserted upon the Roman villas of Wrington Vale and the temples and palaces of Bath. The Celtic farmers of Worlebury had found the need of fortification, the British farmers under Rome found it needless, and the Roman relics dug up in Somerset witness rather to a rule of peace than to an entirely military occupation. Fighting was not needed here as it was needed on the frontiers of Wales and the North. The Romans built houses, made roads, taught farming and agriculture, enriched and educated and civilised the Britons, and when they went away a horde of barbarian invaders, sweeping over the land, wiped out the memory of Rome as though she had never been. Roman mines, Roman roads, the Roman amphitheatre on the side of Mendip where the men of the legions had run and wrestled and fought cocks, dropped out of use and memory and became haunts of ghosts and bogles to the pagans of the North, whose eyes were always looking towards

unseen powers behind the rigours of Nature and the mysteries of unknown places. The innate respectability of our heathen forefathers has stamped the race with its love of elegy and its characteristic yearning sense of pathos in past things and life departed. One of the loveliest poems in our early language can hardly but refer, so a Somerset dweller must feel, to the ruins of the Roman city of Bath, empty and deserted, half buried in the crumbling waste of her own palaces. "How doth the city sit solitary that was full of people, how is she become as a widow, she that was great among the nations and princess among the provinces?" The history of the Mendip country is mostly surmise. Did it all lie desolate, or was it a fastness from which the earlier race was driven out at the last? Looking down from Mendip on the Isle of Avalon and the goodly hills of Somerset, one remembers the story of the Royal coffins lost at Glastonbury, and of the golden hair in the grave at Brent-Knoll that fell into dust when the monks opened it. Perhaps the Britons lingered on here, working their mines and tilling their scanty pastures by stealth, and were regarded as some race of gnomes or hill-elves by the robuster pagan race below, who may have kept their elegiacs for the towns, and left Mendip alone. Mendip miners were a grim generation when Hannah More went up there on foot with her Bible and Prayer-book and her enchanting bonnet

to try to change their manners a little, and they still seem to be a race apart, with queer ingrained qualities hard for strangers to understand.

After the passing of centuries, Mendip is still a borderland where the stability of things seems uncertain. Its history is buried, like the course of its underground springs and rivers sliding far down out of sight and hearing among ways trackless to human feet, their course faintly indicated by the countless swallets that pit the surface of the hills, green, cone-shaped hollows where the water is swallowed down a limestone crevice that leads to some underground channel and causes these depressions by its swirling force as it is sucked down. Many of these swallets carry the water down to places inaccessible to the foot of man, places that send up queer hollow murmurings, and sometimes drenchings of spray in unexpected spots, and give the country people good cause to hint at magic or pixy-work. Following the course of certain other of these channels, or scaling the face of the cliff, caves have been found that contained bones of men and beasts who lived and hunted in these hills in an age almost immeasurably distant from the life of our planet as we know it. High up on the southward edge of Mendip there is a huge great fissure in the hillside, grooved long ago by the same action as that which formed the Cheddar Gorge and is still forming vast channels in the rock far beneath. That is Ebbor

Gorge, and from above it you can see the Welsh hills and the Severn Sea, and half Somerset spread out at your feet. Around the Isle of Avalon the land is very flat, and the "rhines" that carry off the water go in straight shining streaks to the rivers that carry them to the sea. Along such waterways St Joseph might sail up to Glastonbury now as he did when the land was all marsh and mere. You can see the islands standing above the moor as they stood then above the water. A hollow land it is, and when you see the flooded, frozen marsh lying beneath the wall of hill beyond in the pixy-light of a winter sunset, then you understand the fascination of the Mendip country. It is a mysterious region, this secretive tableland that runs away at last and ends itself under the tumbling yellow waters out of which the Flat Holm and the Steep Holm stand up to mark the limit of the range. And it carries down its hidden springs under the sea so that fresh water bubbles up on the Flat Holm close to the waves. You can see all that from Ebbor rocks, and then you look across the gorge itself to the hillside where grey boulders, older than the history of man, break the stretch of bracken and gorse and heather where a few cows graze, and where big waggons laden with "bearen" jolt painfully along the rough wheel-track that serves for a road. There is a little path there that winds across the fernie brae like the path where Thomas the Rhymer followed

the Faery Queen. Beyond that you look towards Wookey Hole, where they found skeletons of extinct monsters, mammoth and sloth and cavebear and woolly elephant, awful outlines of things long vanished from the life of the globe, fearful creatures that once hunted here, were hunted themselves in turn, or died of age or starvation among the fastnesses of these primeval hills. There they lay with bones of other later beasts in a jumbled heap so that living hands could touch and feel them, marvelling at the slow ways of time. Race after race of men have lived here and passed and left their traces in soil or history. But here is a generation elder still, that shared with us the inheritance of the same planet, that is a part with us of the hoary age of these hills; and remote and terrible as it is, it still claims kinship with us. And realising the grim burden of this immeasurably ancient and fearful ancestry, you look back again to the homely face of the world below Mendip with a pang of thankfulness for the small ways of daily life.

A WEST COUNTRY VILLAGE

It is the quaintest haphazard corner of the world, lying under the lee of a common, just in sight of the great road running southwards. So sheltered is it that you may walk across the heath all ruffled with the breeze running before the morning sun, and descend suddenly upon the hamlet lying as still as enchantment under the rim of the high ground, with all its chimneys smoking straight upwards in the shadow.

There is one street and a spur or two, and the main line of houses winds uphill towards the common in a hook-line jointed like an ash-bough. The road was originally a wheel-track to a quarry, and one by one the cottages seem to have been planted down beside it, not straight with stiff civic propriety, but in the neighbourly disorder of a tribal village,—athwart, across, end-long, above and below each other, according as the original settler felt disposed to plant his dwelling, having an eye always to his neighbour's well, his gable-end, or his clump of yew-trees. Yews abound in this windy place, not only in the churchyards, where they were planted, ancient charters say, to protect the church towers from

the winds; but the hedges and gardens are full of them, and you seldom hear of beasts being poisoned through eating the twigs or berries. In the old days, when this land was a forest beloved by Plantagenet kings, these same yews may have furnished bows for Royal huntsmen, and have served the old-time peasantry in their homely crafts, for yew is the best wood known for resisting damp, and makes almost incorruptible axles and pins for mill-wheels and flood-gates.

Here stands one cottage on the edge of a miniature precipice left from the old quarry, and some hundred years or so ago a newcomer thrust himself between it and the road, so that now you may take a devious course round other people's yards to get at the elder settlement. Over the way and down the next steep twist of road another cottage stands at the base of a twenty-foot crag, shadowed almost to its eaves by high rough edges of naked rock. The beautiful perpendicular tower of our parish church was built of stone quarried from this hole, and some thrifty quarrier built a cottage of the remnants on the spot to save hauling. The houses are all washed white, yellow, or pink—sometimes both, for the red soil seems to have bred a sense of colour in the inhabitants—and the roofs are red-tiled; but as you look up the steep street towards the barren heath above, there is a Northern air about its bleakness, and this quality is

heightened by the long walls of loose grey stones that replace hedges in that windy part.

From the top of the common you look down where the valley parts right and left towards the distant cities of Bath and Bristol. From the far-off dim hollow of the former city we look for bad weather to roll up. There lies the village below you, brooded over by its great tower, in the track hollowed long ago by who knows what vast upheavings and still keeping memorials of ancient races, and the relics of an unremembered worship in a great Druid-circle standing among water-meadows, regarded with superstitious reverence by the country folk. They say the stones are a wedding-party who, dancing on into Sunday morning, were turned to stone by a strange dark man who came at midnight to play for them.

Further along the high ground you may see rising out of the distant Channel two little islands that were there before the limestone hill you stand on had become part of the sea-bottom. These two, with a mainland hill hard by and the Tor that rose above the Island of Avalon when King Arthur was borne thither by the three Queens, are survivals of the ancient world that have passed into the commonplace of modern life, bones, as it were, of some primeval monster, become familiar through use and wont, but always reminding you of your ghostly inheritance

in the earth's immeasurable antiquity. There is no strangeness so subtle as the strangeness of familiar things. In the valley just below there is a field where our miners once on a time, quarrying for strontia, laid bare a vast number of human bones and bullets. They got the strontia, and not knowing what to do with the bones, covered them up again and left them. There they lie still, and the face of the meadow is like a sphinx brooding on the wisdom of things that shall never be told. We have no record of a battle here.

The soil of this countryside is of a wonderful red colour that diffuses itself in strange shades of crimson, purple, and blood-red. A ploughed field after rain, or in the sunset, has a menace in its colour. One meadow here is called the Bloody Field, perhaps because in certain lights it is the colour of blood, or perhaps the name is the only memory left

> "Of old, unhappy, far-off things,
> And battles long ago"—

like the nameless bones lying beneath that fair green meadow. The bones of the old world are near the top here, our soil is thin, and when we quarry for the iron ore the red earth is cast up in heaps and drifts that gleam conspicuous from far amid the pastures and grass-lands. The "redding" works, where the ore is refined

into paint and powder, lie down in the valley on a little stream running by an ancient mill that must have been there in Raleigh's days, and looks as if he might walk out of it while you watch. All around the works, walls, paths, and fences are subdued to one prevailing red; even the trees get a tinge, and the water is deep with it. Look down on the reddings from the hilltop in the sunset, and all the place shines like burnished copper. And if you go inside the grinding-house, where the huge wet mill-stones grind incessantly upon the ore, and the air is full of moisture and infinitesimal red particles, and the light slants down from a red-stained window on the men heaving and lifting, all of the same deep colour, clothes and boots and faces, it is a wonderful sight. For in the wet, luminous air the place looks like a workshop of gnomes or hill-spirits out of some old Norse legend, and the sense of redness gets into your eyes and brain, till the fair, peaceful hues of Nature seem swallowed by this dominating mighty colour that has a threat in it, so that when you get out in the fields again you rejoice to feel the earth green under heaven. Or see the miners crossing the fields on their way home, and you could almost fancy them messengers from another world, so intense is the uniform redness of them in the sunset glow.

Most of our village-men are miners, and the

rest farmers and labourers, with a few who work at the old necessary trades,—none of your modern fancies! Wonderful ploughmen they are; it appears to be a race-instinct that goes in certain families, notably one in which the brothers and their father will take the prize from almost anyone in England, and there are others who nearly rival them. A beautiful sight these ploughing matches are; to see one you would think the world was a few hundred years younger, and you had slid back into the days when Wansdyke was given by the Conqueror to a Norman Bishop, and the villeins ploughed and sheared sheep for the monks as they do now for their own little holdings.

The old manners and the ancient superstitions have hardly departed from us who live in this primitive country safe from all but the back-wash of progress. We are intolerant of strangers, and we have more than a covert regard for witchcraft. It is little more than half-a-century since Wansdyke was thought hardly a safe place for travellers, and if a "foreign" youth should present himself there with intent to court a Wansdyke maiden, the native population would instantly set on and stone him. Education and the railroad have done much to soften modern ways, but deep down below the surface the old prejudices and the ancient superstitions are lurking still, as if they only waited the pick of

the miner—circumstance—to lay them bare like the bones in that fair meadow, a grim witness to the possibilities that may be hidden in a world where ten centuries of progress are little more than the beginning of a tale forgotten in the telling.

A SON OF THE SOIL

A WIDE space of ploughland skirts the southern edge of the common, sloping towards the sun and the distant hills. This is the peewits' favourite feeding ground, and here all the year through you may hear their wild, beautiful crying that is like a bodiless thing trying to become articulate to the dull senses "distant in humanity." In winter most of the peewits go away seeking warmth to the seashore and the valleys, but often in the twilight you may hear a solitary straggler crying alone, like a spirit—

> "Calling the lapséd soul
> And weeping in the evening dew."

Many creatures as wild as the peewits live on the common; and some of the older generation who lived in the queer little houses that fringe it seem as if the place they lived on bred in them something of its wild, free quality, just as the sea influences simple folk dwelling by it.

On the other side of the common there is a little old cabin, cowering flat in a cleft before the fierce winds that tear the uplands. It is

built of stones picked off the common, and has no upper story, which our people consider a very poor way of living. "A house be'nt home," say they, "when he don't hev an up and a down." But the bygone heath-dweller who built the hut had a finer instinct for the proprieties of existence, and laid his dwelling safe below the wind's danger-mark, nesting in a furrow, as it were, like a peewit. The last couple who lived there, Nicholas Atwell and his wife Elizabeth, were creatures veritably born of the soil, and partaking of the large serenity of the mother-element.

Nicholas was of a type common in Somerset, sturdy and sinewy, with a round face showing no modelling of bones beneath it. He had the slouching strength of a hazel-sapling bent out of grace by careless nutters, but keeping a threat of rebound to assault. His hair and eyes were of an indescribable strong colour between grey and brown, and his skin was deep-red like the soil that raised and reared him and subdued his clothes and his flesh to its own dominating hue. He looked as if he were hewn from the rock and digged from the pit that his fathers had quarried, and his mind was of a like primitive quality. He was of the earth body and soul, and quite remote from ordinary levels of human morality; so that if you happened to like Nicholas, as you probably would, you would

never have thought of judging him by the average moral standard. He simply overbore the conventions of society with the calm assertiveness of sow-thistle in a garden-bed. Nicholas was not exactly a rascal; he was a rudiment, a bit of the deep-down fundamental humanity that underlies all our civilised vanities. And he was a philosopher in his way, taking success and failure with the resignation of elemental creatures, trees and beasts, and accepting the inevitable with a composure that was first-cousin to humour, the only impregnable stronghold of the over-cultivated.

It is improbable that Nicholas ever suspected the dignity of his own character. He went on passing his life with one eye on the necessities of existence and the other on the police, for these guardians of society do not sympathise with upheavals of primal force and the rights of man. So when missing property was traced to Nicholas' door and restitution failed, he took a few weeks in jail quite cheerfully, and seemed to think the job worth it. He was often in prison, and his wife, the decentest simple soul alive, never seemed to feel shamed by the breadwinner's eccentricities. She lived on nothing, these times, pretty conveniently, like birds in a hard season; the hungry rooks were fed and so was she, and the neighbours were kind to her, for every one liked Mrs Atwell.

She was a gentle, sweet soul, and as neat as a linnet. Nicholas' ways were accepted as an institution by the village, and here we respect existing institutions.

Modern ways are less original than those of Nicholas. He belonged to a spacious period; there was something Homeric about his dishonesty; it was on the grand scale. He signed his name with a mark, but when he stole he did it dramatically, like a Border cattle-lifter. Acquaintance with Nicholas would have disposed you to rank honesty among the second-rate virtues, for there was a wild justice in his ways. "What he thought he might require he went and took," and he took from those that could afford to spare it; and in the simple fashion of the unlearned, those who most needed charity themselves extended most to Nicholas. Brown, the carpenter, a thrifty man and Nicholas' landlord, refused to press the matter when he missed half a load of stone from his yard and heard simultaneously that Nicholas had disposed profitably of two loads in a neighbouring town. "For I wouldn't persecute he," said Brown, "for a matter o' a few score stones when 'tis like the rest of un was picked up here and picked up there, and did ought by rights to be restored to Squire. Not but what rich folk hev a right to property, seein' 'tis theirn; but 'tis hard on the poor to go hungry when a load o' stones will fill

un, in a manner o' speakin'." Brown's own moral balance-sheet was defective, so he left restitution to other powers, and next time Nicholas was unavoidably absented from his native place "about a matter o' a harse and harness," the old carpenter went to Mrs Atwell and offered help with the delicate courtesy that the poor can show to the poor. "For I'd not sleep aisy in my bed," said Brown, "knowin' that one under roof o' mine were wantin' bread." But Mrs Atwell was independent in her gentle way. She thanked him kindly; but she would manage somehow she said. "A religious woman she were," said Brown, "ay, and a dressy body too."

So a bird will tend her feathers however hard she lives, and poor Elizabeth had a hard life on the common; but it was much harder when Nicholas died, and a nephew took his aunt to live near the brook in his cottage that had "an up and a down" to it, and was considered vastly superior to the little old nest on the heath. Elizabeth, shut up in the "comfort" of an ugly bedroom that looked out only on a yard, was a much more pathetic sight than Elizabeth living precariously up on the common in the happy wildness of the hungry creatures that stray there winter-long. She became very silent, and looked as if she wept always and unconsciously, and with her wild grey hair and

her sad face she looked like a print by some old German artist who could feel the soul behind bodily ugliness and ignorance and poverty. Sometimes she would put her stiff old hands that had wonderful delicate fingers up to her head with an indescribably pathetic gesture. "When I did live up to common," she would say, "I did always see the sun arise and set"; and that was the only complaint she ever made. If you shut up a lapwing in a hen-roost, just so it might pine for sunrise and sunset and the free elements.

Mrs Atwell had something of the subtle sense of the she-creature that will penetrate where it cannot control; so in spite of her spouse's lawless ways she had a devotional instinct, and used to read her Bible and keep her little garden like a posy while Nicholas was in prison for his last exploit. There was a vein of comedy in some of these, notably the latest, when the squire was laying out a shrubbery and wanted soil to cover his stony land. He ordered cartloads to be bought, and Nicholas, with a fine sense of the irony that is latent in things mortal, set off early one morning for a secluded piece of Sir George's very own pasture-land, adjoining the common whereon Nicholas dwelt. Skinning off the turf, he dug up several tons of fine juicy top-spit, and then, replacing the skin on the mangled surface of the meadow, he carted the soil next day into

Sir George's paddock, and pulled his forelock subsequently to "Squire" as if the dignity of labour were his native inheritance, while that injured man's guineas jingled impenitently in his pocket all the while. "Squire" laughed when he found out, but Nicholas got six weeks, for such doings are a bad example for the young. And Nicholas knuckled his forehead to "Squire" once more and went off to jail with a cheerful countenance.

Not long after this Nicholas died, and his relatives buried him lavishly in the churchyard, which he had probably never entered since his marriage. He should have been buried on the common beneath the furze and heather, for that was his native element; but the epic way of doing things has fled before inspectors and Boards, so they "walked" him in church as if he had been a sidesman. The "corpse's" friends assembled from far and near on the Sunday after the funeral, and walked in solemn procession into church at the end of the preliminary hymn, so that no jot should be missed of the gloomy dignity of their "blacks" and their funeral faces. They kept together and remained seated throughout the service to mark their official position, waiting till the rest of the congregation dispersed before they moved out again all together. That was the last of Nicholas. The present generation has produced no more of his like. Perhaps it is as well!

THE PLOUGHING MATCH

St Luke's Summer filled the earth with a glory of golden leaves and luminous skies, and All Saints' brought the rain. The ground must be thoroughly damp to make a good ploughing, or the share will not cut a clean furrow. And on our spur of the Mendips we are near the rock. So the week-long spell of rain was welcome to the farmers, and welcome also to less practical persons for the beauty of its shadowy purple drifts and ghostly silences. But on a lovely clear November morning the ploughing match started.

They begin early in the forenoon, and if you are betimes on the road, you may meet some of the teams coming from across the hills to compete with our men, who are amongst the most notable ploughers in the country. The great field where the match is held lies on a slope looking towards Blackdown, and there is a certain road on the way thither called "Kitchen Chimney" because of its narrow and steep descent. A ploughman came up with his team as we crossed the top of it. The early sun was low above the hills at the back of them, and the long dazzling shafts caught the road at an angle and streamed up

between the hedges, filling the uphill road with golden light, and the young man with his beasts came up out of it just as the herdsman of King Admetos might have come one day long ago in Thessaly. His shadow, and the shadows of the great horses, stretched ever so far along the road ahead of them as they came up easily with the deliberate gait of ploughers, the great iron-shod feet of the horses glinting backward in the sunlight. "Marnin'," said the youth laconically, and went away whistling in the track of the sunshine, while the horses' heads nodded rhythmically to the regular lifting of their great hoofs.

The lawful approach to the match field led from the road by a wet foot-track across one field to a fathomless bottom of ploughland skirting the next hedge. So since there was nothing to be lost by it, we decided to take a cross-way thither, and made north in a bee-line. On the way we met a figure that looked like a prehistoric survival—an aged, aged man, whose weight of years appeared incalculable. He was "a-sitting on a gate" like another Immortal, and looked as if he might have begun sitting on it as the Flood was going down, and had watched the progress of events ever since without moving. He did not move as we came up; so we asked him if this was the way to the field, just to see whether he were quite real. He gazed with a ruminative air at the feminine member of the party.

"Happen it be," said he, with the air of one who belonged to an era when roads were not. "But 'tis main riddly sure-ly," he added; and seeing us undaunted by this intelligence, he fixed a beady expressionless eye on us, and in a tone dark with fearful warning, he remarked, "There 'm gateses." We were still unmoved, and the aged one went on to explain that the said gates were of a nature "onfitting for faymales." "But happen," said he, "you'll can find a shard"; and with that he relapsed again into the semblance of an antediluvian survival. So we found a gap in the hedge and scrambled through, while the Ancient went on sitting on his gate and never looked at us again.

There was the field stretched out below us in its wan winter green. There was a tent where the judges were waiting, and a crowd already gathered to look on. There were dogs many and boys many, and carts anchored in the hedges, and horses munching with their noses in bags, and human noses tipped red like the hedge-berries with the nipping November air. Most of the ploughers were there too, looking carefully over their ground and calculating the swell of the earth as it rose and fell eastward, for a special prize is given for setting the line straightest, and the first four furrows are the standard. Each man had a rood to plough; he set up a twinkling white osier at its extremity, and then he must

depend on the nicety of his eye and the steadiness of his horses for drawing the line that goes like an arrow's flight across the field. Thirty teams, good, bad, and indifferent, there were in the field that morning, and a more beautiful sight it would be hard to find, nor one more truly local in its antiquity. Before the Norman Duke sent his men round England to count his manors this village was ploughland amidst a forest. And the names of men long dead who ploughed for a Saxon lord are written in that ancient book. Now, all these centuries after, the Somerset peasants go on ploughing, just as their fathers ploughed when "Alwold held it in the time of King Edward." One may fancy them like the old race in face, for the peasants of this remote part are of a distinct type, and in their indifference to the ways of the mighty and the increase of kingdoms they probably resemble their forefathers too. This manor was given to the Bishop of Coutances at the Conquest, and most likely the "twelve cottagers with their fourteen ploughs" cared as little for the change of an overlord whom they never saw as their children of to-day care for the spread of Empire and the clash of armed kingdoms, except when their sons, drifting by chance into the whirl of things modern, go away and die in far lands, fighting for an Empire that to their fathers is little more than a name. Except for their pipes and greatcoats, the crowd

on this field might have looked on at such a match hundreds of years ago. Many generations bring little change to these distant valleys. The huge shining ploughshares are modern, and so are the splendid horses; but these are things whose modernity does not clash with the venerable processes of the earth; they are like the ceaseless renewing of Nature, "ever young, yet full of eld," and such modern improvements in the primitive needs of man only link him closer to the past.

The field is getting cut up into innumerable perspectives of vanishing parallels that soothe your eye with their fascinating monotony, and the men go deliberately up and down the field following the ploughs that drive their shining blades through the faint green grass-land, and leave a glowing red track behind them—for our soil is full of iron ore that makes the bare earth beautiful in various reds.

Ploughing is not such a sociable business as the hedging contest that is going on hard by. The men work a rood apart from each other, and, besides, it is not prudent to look away right or left from the nose of your plough, and the careful feet of the horses that step so heedfully along the furrow, one great foot behind the other, so that the clean edge of the last-cut ridge shall not be marred. They are beautiful creatures, these horses, that look so

wise and patient as they go down the long perspective of furrows, and turning, come slowly back mounting the hollow slope of the field. They steam white in the white mist that the early sun draws up from the cold damp surface of the earth, and above the splendid red of the soil the watery November sunshine transfigures the mists into a pale luminous wonder of diffused light and opalescent shadow. There is a Welshman ploughing to-day, and our people do not like him. We keep the old fashion of feud, and a man from across the Border is little better than an outlaw to us. We hate strangers, as our fathers did here long ages ago. Farmer Ben Reider, one of a family that spreads in endless ramifications through the village of Wansdyke, is looking askance at "Walshman." "Couldn't he hev' bid to whum to Cardiff," says he, "and not come across channel fur to best we?" "Walshman" is doing too well to please our folk, who scan his trail of furrows jealously as he turns back along the slope. What a sight it is when the horses reach the furrow's end and swing round to the next one, with a straining, and stamping, and rattling of chains, and a scattering of the crowd of boys and beasts standing imprudently within the radius of the great ploughshare's sweep. The ploughman weighs down the heel of the shining blade, swinging it round with his weight, as the

good horses trample round labouring sideways against the huge pull, the great muscles rising and crossing on their wet flanks, and their heads tossing against the pull, all in a vaporous white cloud of steam and sunlight; and the master shouts encouragement in the queer nasalised "a's" that Chaucer's ploughman may have used calling up his team. "Coom a-a-ann," says he, and stops an instant to pick up a stone in the line of the plough, and off they go again down the long red slope.

Job Lovell is champion again, the experts say, and they grudge the Welshman his second, though he well deserves it. The Lovell family have the ploughing instinct in their blood. They are all first-class men in the matches. Job stood up to a plough's tail when he wore a pinafore, and got a prize when he was fourteen; a solemn laborious small figure going steadily up and down furrow, while his father walked by to give advice, but never touched the handles. Old and young, all are sons of the plough. Farmer Reider's father is here in a cart, a hale old man of eighty, who has ploughed his own land for nearly sixty years of that. The old man leans out to speak to his son. "How be, Ben?" says he. "Didst thou see old Tummas a-settin' by Weaver's barton over to Kitchen Chimney Carner?" His son nods. "Ay, truly," he says;

"poor old chap, he don't niver come no nigher than that to match nowadays. How come it he were hurted so sore? Harses weren't sa'cy nowise, was them?" "Nay," says his father, "'twere Tummas's own doin' on account of his stubbornness, look'm. For he went a-ploughin' to Bishopton Match one marnin' after he'd a bin rough wi' the ammonia o' the lungs six weeks afore and were still nesh. And he were leery after he'd a-walked eight mile to Bishopton, but 'a wouldn't take no more but a drink o' cider in a tiddly-wink. And cider be heady stuff to plough on. So 'a did plough straight sure enough, but there come a girt stone anigh the end of the plot, and Tummas did stoop for to haive 'un away, for though he were aged, 'a could wang about a tidy weight so peart as a youngster. I reckon 'twere the fault o' that cider, for Tummas hadn't no call to stumble, but sim'ly 'a did feel a duzziness, for 'a did totter so's the chain catched 'un a knock on the jaw that did make harses start forrard again, and that did send 'un hard down wi's head against the blade. And when us did pull 'un out, he were a-bloodin' like a peg, and have been queer in the head ever since, and won't go nigh a plough. 'Twere a bitter ploughin' for he, poor old chap, for 'a used to be martal smart at the matches, but now the spirit's out of 'un, and 'a can't abide for even to see the field."

THE SHEEP-SHEARING

King John, taking a journey North to admonish the King of Scots, found (says Holinshed's "Chronicle") that, by reason of the great number of enclosures owned by the great, poor men were in many places driven off the land. Whereupon the King "sware," says the Chronicler, "with an oath, that he would not suffer wild beasts to feed upon the fat of his soil and see the people perish for want of ability to procure and buy them food that should defend the realm."

Some Elizabethan prejudice doubtless coloured Harrison's views about that very ill-reported Monarch, for Somerset records prove that King John, like his predecessors, "afforested land to the no small detriment of the tenants," and Wansdyke lies within the ancient forest of Mendip, where a hunting-lodge of King John's still stands. But the Church held more lands hereabouts than the Barons, and even though Abbots at times "did unlawfully enclose" common and waste lands, yet Somerset men, judging by the old records, were not backward in demanding redress for wrongs done to tene-

ments held "since the first crossing" of William the Norman.

There were many sheep fed on the Somerset commons in the old days, and the wool was spun in the homes of the poor and woven for their garments by the village loom. John the Webbe of Wansdyke was a prosperous man in the days of Edward II.; he paid a lay subsidy of two shillings when the next King came! Wood, corn, and coal were the wealth of mediæval England, and all abounded near Wansdyke. For after all, food and clothing and shelter are the first necessities of bodily life; and the poor men who could till their holdings, and graze their few sheep, and build their houses of the wood or stone at hand, were self-dependent in the same degree that the Wansdyke men are now, and probably just about as wealthy in the world's goods, for none of them are rich to-day and none very poor.

Many changes have taken place since the days when "the Webbe, the Dyer, and the Tapicer" were a necessary part of village economy. Trade has come and gone in Somerset, but the Wansdyke men have not, in all probability, been greatly changed by its fluctuations. No large flocks of sheep are kept in Wansdyke, no one has enough land. But many men have a few sheep, some very few. The annual sheep-shearing competitions, however, are supported by most of the

able-bodied men of the village, and there is keen competition for the championship, although shearing, like ploughing, generally goes in families, and one name predominates in the list of prize-winners. It is a beautiful sight, the sheep-shearing, in many ways. For these big, strong Somerset men at work in the fields with their big beasts or their heavy tools have a stolid and reliable air, self-contained and friendly, like a good plough-horse. But at these matches there is animation and energy, and certain qualities lying deeper than the surface come up to view.

The shearers gather in a big tent, men in the middle surrounded by pens full of sheep, outside which the lookers-on throng and pass and stand to watch. The competitors were packed into the smallest possible limit of elbow-room, and all wore white overalls and shirt-sleeves rolled very high, so that the deeply tanned arms and necks showed conspicuous in every movement. Farmer Samuel Pearce, whose family props the Wansdyke reputation for sheep-shearing, wore a blue shirt which distinguished him among the crowd. There were three distinct shades of red in the splendid tan of his skin, because his Sunday collar had left a paler line just below his sunburnt ears and face, and the stain of the red soil showed distinct above the tan in the wrinkles of his industrious elbows. It was very hot in that big tent on June 1st. Fortunately, for three days of sun-

shine had just come in time to dry the sheep after their dipping. "A lepping May," says the local proverb, "brings a good mow of hay." But it spoilt practice for the shearing and made the prize-men anxious, because Pan himself could not shear a wet sheep. There they were, however, forty pens full of them, and all dry, in a barricade round the shearers, and outside them a surging multitude of onlookers watching, talking, criticising the work. Three hours' work and four fat sheep to shear. They were all at it for dear life, and no time to exchange a word with friends at the barrier, or pause for anything but to bury a hot face in the great mugs of cider brought round at intervals. A full-grown sheep is no light weight, and the men's figures were a splendid study as they heaved the great creatures, and stooped and stretched about them, arms and legs and sinewy backs bent all at once to the task of holding and turning and snipping the helpless heavy mass under the shears. Somerset countrymen are a fine race, well-knit and powerful, and when they are working in their earth-stained clothes have a splendid natural grace and vigour with which the weekly disguise of Sunday clothes and idleness presents an odd contrast. But though the men appear to advantage during a shearing match, the sheep does not. The situation is a trying one for the pretty mountain-bred sheep of the

Northumberland moors, but for the compound of wool and mutton that makes a Southdown, nothing could be more undignified. He is planted miserably on end, and spreads into queer, shapeless expansions like a half-filled meal-sack, four helpless hoofs meeting in a bunch in front, and a bewildered foolish face doubled backwards out of harm's way between the shearer's knees while he makes the first cut along the animal's chest, and turns back the fleece to avoid smothering him when he is laid on his side for the next move. At this point the sheep recovers himself enough to kick, under the impression that he is about to be slain. The little sharp hoofs can give a stinging blow if you meet them, and there is a great art in holding your sheep with discretion, for unless he keeps quiet he may get snipped, and then the prize is lost. When the sheep has resigned himself it is good to watch the skill with which the fleece is snipped and turned back bit by bit, until at last it lies out entire in the gleaming whiteness of the inside wool, and is rolled up with care (for this, too, counts in the prize), while the original owner is bundled back without ceremony into the pen in an abashed and tight-fitting condition, and received with horror by his yet unshorn companions. The sheep had the best of it then, for the shearers got dreadfully hot towards the end of the three hours. But Farmer Samuel, in his blue shirt,

took very little notice of the great cider mugs; he snipped away with a steady deliberation, and his good brown face looked very little hotter than it had looked when he began. But he glanced now and then towards the end of the tent, where boys of varying shapes and sizes were busy each with a pen holding two sheep, and a father or adviser of some sort kneeling beside them to give directions and help to hold the sheep. Farmer Samuel's eldest boy was shearing beside him, qualifying for a prize too, and his second boy was in the younger class who received help. Joe's pen was the best shorn in the whole tent, said the judges, not excepting the champion's. But the most attractive figure of all was a little counterpart of Samuel, clad in a small blue shirt, and wearing the same deliberate and responsible air on his solemn round face. The youth was nine years old and small for his age, and his short legs could get no grip on the sheep, which appeared several sizes larger than the shearer. But he lay prone on its body like a resolute small frog, digging in his knees and snipping away at the woolly monster with little brown arms that had hardly outgrown dimples. When the sheep kicked it heaved him bodily into the air, but the big hands beside him held it down again and directed his small shears. It was hard work, but young Sam meant to get his prize, and there were two to be shorn. "Don't thee

look up, boy," said Blue Shirt Senior warningly, "thou'lt miss thy time"; and Blue Shirt Junior obediently turned away his eyes from the crowd at the barrier and went on steadily snipping. It is a fine thing to be a prize-man at nine years old, and finer still to carry on traditions of ability. Among the "able-men" of Wansdyke before the Armada there was a William Peres, pikeman, enrolled among those who were to defend the realm, and there is no reason to suppose that the Peres who wore corselet and burgonet and carried an eighteen-foot pike more than three hundred years ago was not an ancestor of the small sheep-shearer in the blue shirt. Many local names are unchanged since then. John the Webbe was doubtless the progenitor of the Wansdyke Webbes of Henry VIII.'s time, clothiers, apprentices of Bristol merchants and prosperous men, one of whom left to a certain Eliza Clark the notable legacy of "two pairs of sheets, not the best pair, nor the worst, but *mediocre*." From the earliest days shearing and spinning and weaving have employed and supported the Somerset peasantry, because "sheep," as an old authority says, "is the most profitablest cattle a man can have." And the English "Webbes" were trained and taught by foreign craftsmen since shortly after the Conquest, though Somerset men have never liked strangers, as the Protector's Flemings found in Edward VI.'s

days. "John the Frenchman" lived in Wansdyke when Edward II. was King. History does not say what became of him, but more than one local patriot expressly stipulated that his chantry priest must not be a Frenchman. And there is a quaint local illustration of the early law for protecting aliens in a thirteenth-century record of a neighbouring village: —Wolward the Tucker found drowned near Langley. No one is suspected. Judgment, misadventure. No Englishry. Therefore murder." But when the domestic industry had become international trade, then came the time of great fortunes and great poverty. The great lords enclosed and the great capitalists suppressed, and the land became poor in the poverty of them that should defend the realm. Splendid churches were raised by the wealthy capitalists of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, but national defence failed with the decay of the poor tenants, who could not farm their holdings because of the enclosures. The weakness of English naval defence was an international gibe in the time of Henry VI.: "Where be our ships, where be our swords become? Our enemies bid for a ship set a sheep." Trades must fluctuate, and the lesser men must suffer; and when they are deprived of occupation and driven off the land, the age that sees

"Trade's unfeeling train
Usurp the land and dispossess the swain"

sees the walls of empire shaken. And when the Defender of the Faith turned the Church out of doors, then the poor suffered again, because the hungry courtiers who got the Church lands had no regard for tenants' rights. Leland describes this part of Somerset as full of enclosures, and though many of these were doubtless tilled, yet he mentions a certain Duke in the neighbourhood who took "much fair ground very fruitful of corn" and enlarged his park "to the compass of six miles, not without many curses of the poor tenants." And yet at that time certain villages bordering Wansdyke, sleepy now and silent, were busy centres of life, "standing much by clothing," and the inhabitants were beginning to build themselves the "fair houses of stone" that are standing to-day. But by the Restoration the "brokers and factors" had spoiled the trade for the West Country villages and caused infinite distress. The great company of Merchant Adventurers, which made Bristol the second town in the kingdom, was decaying, and the old complaint that home-spun cloth was put aside for the finer foreign webs came back again. Earl Simon the Righteous had tried to remedy that by bidding the patriotic "not to seek over-precious raiment," but wear native manufactures, though unbecoming!

But the day of capital and factory work was approaching, and now the Wansdyke sheep-

shearers have nothing to do with the fleece when once it is off the sheep's back, unlike the Northern farmers, who send it to the mill and get it back in rough homespun: one fleece clothes a man! The craft has left us, and though a vast family of Dyers peoples one end of the village and Weavers the other, the original use of the names is out of mind. Thanks to the old redding works, and the ancient quarries, out of which some of the noblest towers in the kingdom were built centuries ago, Wansdyke men have not been at the mercy of a shifting trade as were some of their neighbours, and it is pleasant to imagine that they now stand on much the same footing as they did when their forefathers were enrolled in the county musters as pikemen, archers, and billmen. The labourer's condition has improved vastly in the last hundred years, and men who lead a decent, laborious, and cheerful existence on a pound a week, and bring up "long vam'leys" besides, play no inconsiderable part in the welfare of kingdoms. The wage is hard to earn and the ways are narrow, but the most prosperous have not always the most grit. Neither have certain of the younger generation, who enjoy more privileges than the elder, always the more enterprising character. The farmers say that a prolonged education makes the modern boy "too proud to work," and "book larnen ben't no martal use to plant tarmuts." Some of the

best men in the village left school at ten; one youth was accustomed, in business intervals, to clean the house and get the dinner and fight an elder brother for the privilege of blacking the grate, while his mother was away on a sixteen-mile tramp with the letters. Mendip villages are full of men who love the soil that breeds them with a devotion no less strong because they will not speak of it to strangers, sentiment being no part of their workaday life; but the red lanes and the spring pastures and ploughing fields are an intimate part of their nature. The industrious shearer of nine is a worthy descendant of the pikeman who "defended the realm," and doubtless sheared sheep too, twelve generations ago. Their poverty is an independent poverty, and goes to make character. Some people have disabilities which seem to be in favour of success, like the men that fought at Minden. Advanced education does not always take effect upon their brains, fortunately. Another champion shearer, the descendant of prize-men, although naturally averse from literary pursuits, was laid up for weeks with a broken leg, and during that time actually read through "Treasure Island," sent from the Rectory among a heap of illustrated papers. "Passon" remarked to his father that Tom was turning a scholar. "No, sure," said he reassuringly; "it don't stop in's head long enough to hurt 'en."

Too much traffic in borrowed ideas is not the best training for such men. There is a certain wisdom that comes from the soil, and makes a character not moulded in Board schools. There need be no lack of such as "should defend the realm" while these men are able to remain on the land and continue to live by it in the state of sturdy independence that has moulded their race and made it endure, since—

> "Self-dependent power can time defy,
> As rocks resist the billows and the sky."

THE RAT-CATCHER

He lived on the very top of the common about a bowshot beyond Obed Pearce's "barrow"—the origins of which were still intriguing the new squire. It was a round stone house, with a peaked roof on the top of it like a toadstool, and it stood there by itself ever so far from anywhere, in the very middle, to all appearance, of a great patch of gorse, so that you wondered how anything human ever got through to the door of the queer round dwelling. But there was really a path through the gorse-patch, and outside the gorse the wide common lay all around, and the wide sky spread overhead. The common is nearly in the middle of the long straggling parish, and many ways lead towards it; winding lanes, some of them, buried deep between tangled hawthorn hedges, footways and fieldways, some others, but towards the hill's top they all merge into shadeless grassy tracks carved out of the wilderness of furze and bracken where larks nest and peewits cry. Following these long wheel-tracks you seem to have come climbing up to the top of the world into some pleasant strange place apart from the inhabited world of ordinary

humanity. It is windy, and lonely, and full of light, golden light in the sky and golden radiance on the earth of blossoming gorse and tawny bracken, except in the months when the young fern is pushing croziers through the turf and nearly all the furze is green. The place is full of an amazing sense of space, for it is not very big. But the inhabited world lies almost out of sight of the round house on the top of the common. There are hills on three sides of it, far away across valleys, and on the fourth side, when the north-west blows, you catch the glimmer of the Severn sea and the faint line of the Welsh Hills beyond. But you do not see that from the house itself, because they have planted a screen of thorn-trees to protect it from the autumn gales. And the fierce wind has twisted the thorns into queer elfin shapes as if they were things bewitched by some infernal malice and bound there at the end of the ways where the common lies wrapped in an incommunicable peace of its own untroubled by the jar of things temporal.

Curiously in character with the solitude of place was a figure often to be seen up there cutting the furze and bracken with a great shining scythe, like Father Time. He was the Rat-catcher's father-in-law, part of whose occupation in life was the scything of "bearen," for the cattle of such small holders round as had rights on the common. He was a straight-backed spare

old man, with grey hair and beard and strongly marked features that looked as if they might once have been carved in stone before he became flesh. He was an extraordinary good man with a scythe, and had a gift of silence so remarkable that it might have been the bed-rock of genius. He was the steadiest of workers and never out of employment by the farmers round. Whether he was standing up with the great crooked blade held out in front of him, drawing a " zyve-stone " with deliberation along its edge, or whether he was scything, long-armed, with a slow steady swing, the Rat-catcher's father-in-law seemed to share the perdurable character of the common itself.

On his way home he always went through the gorse-patch and stopped at the gate of the Round House, while his daughter would come to the doorway, or a child would run out to greet him. Then he would nod, and pass on with no word spoken. The Rat-catcher had a respect for Granfer which he did not bestow on many people. He was himself fluent and voluble in address, and had a manner of singular persuasiveness. His command of language was, sad to say, most frequently employed in evading the attacks of spiritual authorities such as Minister or Parson, when these latter found an opportunity of admonishing him on the subject of his too numerous deviations from the lawful paths of rat-catching. For he was a famous rat-catcher.

It had been a secret in his family for five generations, jealously guarded, and handed down from father to son, and he was known through the country side and beyond it for his skill. He was a unique and interesting figure, this rat-catcher; looking at him you might have believed that a five generations' association with rats and their ways had infused something of the rat-character into the composition of the man who caught them so cleverly. He had a compact tight-fitting air, and a large share of that personal neatness which belongs to those who grow their own clothes. His coat and his cap and his gaiters had a sheath-like fit as if they grew on him; he had a light step, and a light touch, and a pair of restless eyes that continually glanced away, and rather a sharp chin, and when he talked his upper lip twitched a little now and then under his moustache as if there might have been a long tooth gleaming beneath, only you never quite saw the long tooth. And in spite of the involuntary gnawing suggestion his manner was polite and persuasive; if he had ever been a rat he had certainly been an agreeable one; so the impression grew upon you till after looking at him for a long time you were almost disposed to wonder what had become of his tail.

His professional vocation took the Rat-catcher far afield, to distant parts of the country, and his family were accustomed to absences, on his

part, of a week or more. But sad to relate, these absences were sometimes prolonged beyond the calls of professional duty, and news of him might or might not reach his family, according as news travels in lonely places. But whether it came or not the Rat-catcher's wife knew only too well the meaning of those prolonged absences, and her usually grave face looked graver and paler, while she waited the return of the prodigal. Whatever might be said in the neighbourhood about these drinking-bouts of the Rat-catcher, his wife was never heard to say anything at all on the subject. Perhaps she had inherited her father's gift of silence; perhaps there were reasons lying deeper yet, but at any rate the Rat-catcher's wife never complained, though the shadows might deepen in her great dark eyes that looked as if they could hold all the sorrow of the world and never be filled.

The Rat-catcher had five children. There had been nine, but four were dead, and their mother always spoke of these as though they were still amongst the others. The children adored their prodigal parent without reservation, for he was always tender with them, especially the babies Their mother said there never was such a man with children. He would sit up half the night in his wife's shawl, petting and soothing a fractious nursling when the mother was ill. "An' so fond," she said proudly, "wi' the last

baby, as iver he were wi' the first o' they all." But the dearest of all was the half-witted cripple boy of six, loved by the whole family with a tenderness which primitive people will often lavish upon those whom the more sophisticated regard with a shrinking pity. The cripple ruled the house; his cheerful inarticulate babble seemed to be a source of constant delight and amusement to his relatives, the Rat-catcher himself was his especial favourite and slave. And when the Rat-catcher returned from his wanderings, the form his penitence usually took was a fit of unusual silence during which he would go about with a grim face and show more than usual gentleness to the children, especially the cripple.

It was on such occasions that Parson usually came round to admonish the Rat-catcher, who was accustomed to receive his exhortations with the politeness due to Parson's official position. But whenever he was moved to answer, his wily tongue was ready with all sorts of elusions and evasions. And he was never seen within church or chapel, neither did he take the pledge, and his wanderings grew more and more frequent and more prolonged, and his wife's tragic eyes grew more tragic though no trace of it appeared in her voice. And the children's clothes were more and more mended in the course of descent towards the youngest, while the eldest had fewer and fewer new clothes but went about in short

inadequate garments, much embroidered with darns.

Then one April the snow fell late and lay long, and after it went away the Spring came suddenly in such a splendour of blossom as is seldom seen even in flowery Somerset. All the valleys were full of apple blossom and the blackthorn covered the hedges like fairy linen laid out to bleach. The south-west wind blew through the hawthorn screen beside the Round House, and the gaunt, grim old thorn trees began to cover themselves with a crowd of buds as if in mockery of their own aspect of incalculable age. The sky was full of flying white clouds that seemed to touch the edges of the hill-top as they raced through the blue. Granfer was out in a field adjoining the common scything the young shoots of a gorse-patch that had been burned and was springing again. Looking towards the Round House on the slope above he saw his son-in-law come out of it and turn rather quickly towards a long lane that led down to the village and the world below. On the brow of the hill he appeared to catch sight of the old man swinging his scythe beyond the hedge, for he stopped and stood awhile on the rim of the world, as it seemed, with the sky behind him. He took his pipe out, paused as if undecided, and finally replaced his pipe and went away down the wind. Granfer sharpened his scythe in a leisurely fashion and said nothing.

No news came of the Rat-catcher for three weeks ; it was the usual news then, but he did not come back afterwards. Weeks passed and no more was heard, and everyone began to wonder what was to become of the Rat-catcher's family if he never came back at all.

Things went ill at the Round House, for the cripple was ailing ; the south-west wind blowing over the common seemed to be blowing out the frail life that the Rat-catcher's wife tried in vain to shelter in her arms. The child asked for Daddy, but no Daddy came back to comfort the ailing body and small crumpled legs. Parson one day walking over the common, with his spectacles gleaming skywards and a baggy umbrella held behind him like a rudder, trotted up to the door of the Round House and looked inside. "Not come back, eh," said he, "dear, dear, dear, dear, very sad. Does that boy know his catechism?" William Henry, aged thirteen, washing potatoes in a corner, proved himself sound on that point. Parson stopped him half way through his Duty to his Neighbour to remark that the cripple was very ill, and undertook to summon Doctor himself. And William Henry was to go as weeding-boy and odd-job man in the Rectory garden the next day.

The dairy-woman and hen-wife at the Rectory was half-sister to the Rat-catcher, and she came back with William Henry to ask news of her

errant brother. "Miss 'en," she said with a sympathetic glance around, "yes, sure, a man be a thing anyone do get used to, an' I mind how I did hearken many a day for mine to scrape's feet by the door a' comin' in to's tea, and him a' lyin' two year in's churchyard grave. 'Tes just so's the great clock a'stooded, when the man be gone, an' can niver be wound no more for all our hearkenin'." She looked at the child's wasted body and drawn face. "He do look mortal rough," she said. "Mid hev' swallowed a microbe, I reckon, same as Pearce's maid to Stoke. An' did stick inside o' her lungs, so big's your hat it were, they did say. An' her fell away and grew so pinickin', the big hearty maid her had a'bin. Her did die o't in dree monthses and I saw her buried. But 'tisn't to look for, that thic child should be strong when he weren't a'christened at the Fount. When I did hear that Parson wer' a'gwain to christen 'en to whoam, 'long o' bein so nesh, I did know 'twer no good to look for a sickly babe to grow well when weren't a'took to church to be done at the Fount. And so he've never a'bin no better, and thou cassn't help it now, I do fear 'twill go hard wi' 'en. Blue in the face he be, well-nigh. 'Tis fits, I reckon, as he've always had sin' he were christened here to whoam. I did tell 'ee 'twere wrong. Now I've heard say as how Ben Weaver's brother did go, an' him so

blue in the face as a moucher, an' all thro' swallyin' of a bittle. In the milk, it were, and he were a drinken' in the dark and did swally the bittle what were fallen in. An' swell he did, and turn black, and kept on a'swellin' and a turnin' blacker, and did vancy he'd go in to hospital. So doctors, they dedn' know what to make of 'en, and did open a vein in's arm, just for to see, an' I tell thee, all his veinses was full of young bittles, an' him that black in the face 'twer shockin'. So doctors not knowing what to do wi' 'en did just put 'en between two feather beds and did smother 'en. All along o' the bittle that were; but if 'twer the ague, put a spider in the water, and drink 'en when he do curly up. That be a good cure, but if it be they fits, thou should'st make 'en swally hairs from the cross on a donkey's back. An' must be a she-ass, look, since he'm a boy, or else Parson's donkey mid ha' done. But thou'd best not tell Parson. An' Parson too, look, he do pray beautiful, 'twould be good for the child if he'd say a prayer over 'en. But I'll send thee they hairs from Cox's donkey to Stoke, and mind thou don't let Doctor know or happen he'll not give thee his own stuff, an' it be martal good, for sure, but there cassn't be no harm to use what them as went before us did use, for there be some things as the gentry don't knaw on. So mind thou don't tell Parson." And she went away home over the

common and left the Round House silent behind her.

The hairs were brought and duly swallowed, but there was no change for the better, and neither Doctor's stuff (generally regarded in the village as little short of infallible) nor Parson's visits availed to rouse the feeble life that seemed to be flickering to its last ray. William Henry brought word the next week that his brother was worse and Veyther weren't come back, and the Rat-catcher's sister prepared to mount the common once more with despondency at her heart, remembering the fatal omission to have the cripple's health made sound by pouring water on him at the Font. The mother was sitting beside a fire of sticks with the little twisted figure in her arms, and they were both so still that the thin blue curl of smoke seemed the only live thing in the room. "My dear life," said the visitor, startled, "he ben't gone, be 'en?" "Nay, I don't think," said the mother without moving, and her great eyes turned to the other woman who bent over the small pinched face with anxiety. "He be near the end," she said. Now lay 'en on the zettle, do 'ee, my dear, an' don't 'ee hold 'en so while he do go. 'Tis danger to the living while the dying do vetch his last breath." The mother tightened her clasp a little. "I tell thee," said her sister anxiously, 'twill bring thee calamity if thou'st too nigh when the

soul do pass wi' the last breath. Lay 'en on the zettle, now do 'ee." But the Rat-catcher's wife would not be persuaded.

The child died in the morning, and his mother made no moan while she tended the crippled body for the last time. There was a piteous little procession two days later, winding down the long common track towards the church in the valley below. Four little girls carried the small bier, after the Somerset custom of burying young children, when boys carry a girl-child and girls a boy. A gloom had fallen on the Round House which the hardships and want caused by the breadwinner's absence had never been able to cast. The whole family seemed to feel the loss of the helpless burden, maimed in mind and body, more deeply than the other. They had accepted penury with philosophy, but the loss of the half-witted cripple seemed to his family a grief too piercing for comfort. And William Henry in the Rectory garden whistled no longer, but weeded carrots in silence and tears.

The child had been buried two months and the year was on the turn. Up above the world the common shimmered like a golden sea with the ceaseless movement of tawny fronds and golden spikes of gorse troubled perpetually by the winds. There was nobody on the hill-top but a few ponies grazing among the fern, and Granfer standing up straight with his scythe-blade upper-

most before him drawing his scythe-stone slowly and steadily along its glittering edge. He put the stone back in his pocket and swung the scythe with a long deliberate sweep along the edge of the clearing, bending a little sideways to the strokes. At the end of the swathe he turned, and then became aware of someone watching him from the edge of the common where one of the long green ways came climbing up from the world below. Granfer looked at the distant figure with the sky behind it and went on scything, and looking at it again every time he turned without pausing in his swing. The golden bearen went down steadily before the relentless swing of his blade; swathe after swathe was shorn, but he made no sign of recognition and neither did the figure against the sky. The sun sank lower towards the channel, and the sky glowed like a furnace above the far-off hills; then the miners' bell in the valley rang the signal for leaving work. Granfer finished his swathe without hurry, and swinging his scythe up over his shoulder prepared to go away too into the sunset. The great curved blade behind his head glinted in the rays and cast arrows of light this way and that as the old man went. He stopped at the gate of the Round House and looked round once more before he peered at the doorway that showed dark like a burrow's mouth because of the strong light behind the house. There was nobody to be seen, not even a child.

Granfer paused a little and then went up the path. The Rat-catcher's wife was within preparing supper for her family out in the hedges getting mouchers. Granfer stood his scythe behind the door and stooped under the lintel. His daughter looked round at him where she stood in the chimney-place with the great settle making dusk in the angle, though the window behind it was a square of flame with the sunset. "He'm a'come back," said Granfer, and slowly withdrew himself, leaving her half turned with the big wooden spoon poised in mid-air on its way to the cabbage pan. The Rat-catcher's wife stood quite still while the sound of her father's feet went back over the threshold, and beyond the doorway she heard him lift his scythe and go away up the path. At the gate there was a half audible stir that might have been the wind. She stood there waiting until there was another step in the doorway, a lighter one this time, then she put the spoon quickly back in the pan and turned round, and there was the Rat-catcher on the threshold, holding his cap with both hands in front of him, twitching his upper lip a little and looking more like a rat than ever.

Next time Parson came the Rat-catcher was hard at work in the garden, and received Parson's admonitions without a word of self-defence, and, it must be owned, with equally little appearance of penitence. He was as secretive as a rat, and

nobody, except perhaps his wife, ever knew where he had been, and what he had been doing. But he appeared to have foresworn rat-catching from that day forth, and his wife acquiesced in that as she acquiesced in all his ways, without comment. The earth thenceforward provided for the Rat-catcher and his family; he and William Henry established in time a highly profitable market garden among the allotments near the church. Rats for him went scatheless, and his old clients were left to the mercy of advertisements in local papers crying up the virtues of different patent destroyers, of which none, it is said, could compare for a moment with the Rat-catcher's traditional and secret method. Neither did he appear to have passed on the secret to any of his offspring, so the tradition seems likely to perish with him. But his potatoes grew to be better and bigger than anyone else's in the village, though the inhabitants to a man put them in on Good Friday for fear of blight. Nobody has yet accounted for the Rat-catcher's success; earth-magic dies hard in rural Somerset!

THE ARM OF THE LAW

It was the pig who started the whole business. Not that there was anything to be alleged against the personal character of the pig, who was, in fact, a much more honest and useful member of society than Timothy Atwell, his owner, a respectable and industrious beast (the pig, not Timothy) who concentrated all the energies of his lean, hard-faring person upon the purpose of bacon for which Providence had created him. His owner was, indeed, far from being a shining light in the industrial paths of parish life; it was a matter of surmise how he ever got along at all, his known sources of revenue being singularly uncertain, and in Timothy's periods of prosperity it happened not infrequently that his neighbours missed property. But the pig was his own, without a doubt, for Parson was known to have bestowed one of his own litter on the plausible beggar coming to him with a circumstantial tale of why he could not pay his rent, and had, moreover, remitted the rent for an indefinite period. But then every one knew that Parson, although a homely gentleman and not high-minded, was nothing but an abstracted old bachelor, and too high-learnt to have much sense.

So the pig grew on his scant provision and on irregular supplies of barley meal that came from goodness knew where (though goodness was not generally supposed to know much about Timothy's doings). Neighbouring farmers may have had misgivings, though when things were darkly said about Timothy Atwell it was usually with the cautious addition: "But I wouldn't wish my name to be mentioned," since people who have ricks must not say too much about their neighbour's shortcomings.

This was how it came about that the pig and young Timothy between them gave Police-Constable Tovey food for reflection. Meeting Parson one day in Featherbed Lane, old Timothy asked if he would kindly take a loin of pork as he, Timothy, looked forward to killing the pig in a day or two, and he omitted the usual polite invitation to come and see the pig after he was killed. Parson, homely gentleman, said "Yes," but the loin of pork failing to arrive—"Where's that pork?" asked Parson, meeting young Timothy a week later. "Please, zur, peg got better," said the ingenuous youth, unskilled as yet in his parent's guileful ways. So the tale of Timothy Atwell's pig was in full swing when the new policeman arrived the following week. Now Police-Constable Tovey was something of an artist in his profession, and studied in some degree the psychology of crime, though he could not have

told you what the phrase meant. He was, moreover, a friend of Police-Constable James Andrews who was third cousin to blind John Andrews the village oracle, respected by John as a man of superior intelligence like himself, and always alluded to majestically as "The Force." John knew all about the seamy side of village affairs, and could cast a lurid light on the dark places of most family histories, so Police-Constable Tovey heard many strange things about his new district before he had been in charge of it a week.

It happened that one wet afternoon soon after his arrival, the new policeman's attention was attracted by the singular appearance of the youngest Atwell but two climbing with great difficulty the stile that led towards his home by the brook. On a casual observation it looked as if the youth had a wooden leg, but on closer scrutiny his uneasy gait and the apparent inflexibility of his left knee explained itself when portions of a gaunt wire skeleton and the headless top of an umbrella were seen projecting below his small but baggy trouser leg. "That's an uncommon queer way to carry a rumberellow," thought Police-Constable Tovey, who was, as has been stated, a bit of a Sherlock Holmes. And after watching Master Atwell out of sight he continued his walk down the street in deep thought. Passing Widow Read's door he found her maid in tribulation because her umbrella had

been missed from behind the schoolroom door, where she had undoubtedly stood him in the morning, as five small friends testified with strong assurances. "I do zim," said Police-Constable Tovey, after hearing Doris's tearful statement, "as somebody hev' a-took your maid's rumberellow." "I do zim," rejoined Doris's wrathful parent, "as somebody wi' a tidy cheek hev' a-took 'en, seein' both Ben and Joe hev' carr'd thiccy rumberellow thic seven year past, and the whole place do know the look of 'en." After a little more discussion the new policeman departed, saying he would attend to it; and stalking in then and there upon the Atwell family assembled at tea: "Where'm Doris Read's best rumberellow?" he demanded, and the implement standing in the corner answered for itself. This incident created great respect for the new policeman's deductive faculty, and promoted a feeling of security among owners of portable property in the neighbourhood. The Force's reputation was established, and timid persons derived great comfort from his vigilant and reliable presence.

His "redeship" became still more evident when he saved the situation between Mrs Masters and young Seth Baker, whom the widow accused of having taken money out of the drawer of the great settle when Seth had looked in to cheer her up with news of a neighbour's burial. Baker was known to have been engaged in unlucky

betting transactions, and Police-Constable Tovey had his reasons for not wishing the young man to be dealt with too summarily. He walked in upon flustered Mrs Masters with his most official swing : "Now be 'ee certain 'ee did put money in thic part?" said he, but Mrs Masters, who was rather a high-minded body (fair ate up with pride, her neighbours said), resented any suggestion that she herself might be mistaken. She went off in a miff and finally lost her temper, and said she'd let the Magistrates know what justice was, and pay for what she got, too, that she would, and see if she didn't tell 'em tales of that gallus Baker and his doings. "Now be careful," said Police-Constable Tovey, "be certain o' your facts, Mrs Masters, before 'ee do go to commit the lad," and he then proceeded to bombard her, as she afterwards told a neighbour, "wi' such a drouk o' words, I wer' in a fair caddle." "There'm perjury," says he, "and there'm contempt o' court, and there'm wilful misrepresentation o' character, which be all the same as false witness out of Ten Commandments," a' says, "an' Magistrates be gentry," says he, "and knowledgable volk what won't be kep' quiet wi' five pounds nor tarrified wi' powerful language, an' I advise 'ee" a' says, "don't 'ee go for to take away the lad's character when there ben't no evidence, not to call evidence but ill-will and female contrairiness," says he, "and do 'ee goo

upstairs like a good soul and look in thy locked boxes and see if 'ee hevn't made an error," says he. An' I did look, and ther' 'twer sure enough, on the tack under my best bonnet, where I hadn't minded to hev' put 'en last Monday was week, in consequence of bein' bad abed and not able to go out Sunday last."

Police-Constable Tovey walked home with young Baker and talked to him so eloquently about the evils of betting and the force of temptation that the young man not only promised amendment but did amend. Nor was this the only occasion on which the Force's sense and kindliness brought back stray sheep from the paths of error before they had gone too far in it. There were many such affairs that never came before the public eye, but more than one young man knew how much he owed to the policeman's vigilance and friendly warning. The affair which finally covered the Force with glory was one which he himself thought nothing of, in fact knew to be one of those accidents which dazzle the public eye and bring unmerited fame upon public characters through no design of their own. This was the recovery of the corpse of Granfer Dyer's only goose, the pride of his heart, the last survivor of a brood cut off untimely by a wet June. Granfer and his two grandchildren depended on that goose for all their Christmas festivities, and indeed he was a personable gander, always

referred to as The Bird, since in Somerset the female crowd is not counted in comparison of the cock-bird.

He disappeared, and tragedy enveloped the Dyer household, who came in a body to Police-Constable Tovey, Granfer distracted and the children weeping. The Force on this occasion was perplexed. Happening to call on John Andrews that afternoon he mentioned, privately, the disappearance of the gander, which the whole village was talking about. John, scenting a mystery, cheered up. The intellectual problem stimulated him. Police-Constable Tovey drank his tea and talked to Mary while John perpended. "Mary," said John suddenly, "do Atwells grow own onions?" "Grow own onions indeed," said gentle Mary in unwonted wrath; "a slatternly set, wooden' trouble to weed the bed if 'twer choked!" "Young Jerry Atwell," said blind John, who knows everything, "wer' down to Passon's a-beggin' sage and onions, and Passon did give 'en a bundle, too; Gardener did tell I. That have a superstitious look to my thinkin'." Police-Constable Tovey emptied his cup and departed with his usual dignified gait, without hurry or fluster. He went straight over the stile leading down to the brook where Atwell's cottage stands, but instead of following the path round to the front of the house, he struck downwards towards the water where the pigstye

stood empty, since the pig was sold to support the family during Timothy's last absence in gaol. The Force walked majestically towards the pig-stye, opened the crazy gate, stooped down, and looked inside the door. There was a heap of feathers, soft, white feathers, freshly plucked, and there was a head, a melancholy, yellow-beaked, bodiless head, which the Force picked up without emotion and put in his pocket. Stooping thus he noticed something shining beneath the feathers. He reached down and took hold of a buckle. He pulled the buckle, a strap followed, then something jingled, then a fine new harness was uncovered in its entirety, a harness which Police-Constable Tovey recognised as Farmer Obadiah Pearce's prize harness won at the last ploughing match, and there was the plate stating the fact in letters plain to read and not yet detached by the borrower of the harness. Police-Constable Tovey came out of the pigstye and walked up to the house with his fine, official swing to inquire what Farmer Obadiah Pearce's best double harness was doing on the damp floor of Timothy's pigstye. As he opened the door a stimulating flavour of roast goose greeted his nose, and the spectacle of a half-devoured biped of fine proportions met his eyes. "Dyer's gander, a b'lieve," said the Force sarcastically, and there is no need to harrow anybody's feelings with a further description of the con-

viction and sentence of the head of the Atwell family. He was quite accustomed to it, and at any rate the family had had a hearty meal off the gander. And it was the gander who (posthumously) covered the Force with glory in the eyes of the village. His recapture was held a greater achievement than that of the double harness or even of Doris Read's rumberellow. Though, to speak the truth, the exact manner of Timothy's conviction with regard to that gander was never known, for one gander, as the Magistrates knew, is very like another when he is bereft of his clothing and partly eaten to boot. And though the Dyer family recognised the head of their beloved bird with tears, and would have sworn to his identity under any circumstances, and however dismembered, it must be supposed that if the magistrates included the affair of the gander in Timothy's conviction, they were acting on evidence which was chiefly negative and also upon long acquaintance with Timothy Atwell. Whence they may have concluded (*a*) that with his known income, or absence of income, he should not have provided his family with roast goose out of season, (*b*) that nobody except Dyer had missed a goose, and (*c*) that the next time Timothy appeared before them they would commit him for assizes on the strength of his innumerable previous convictions. The Dyer family got

another goose from Parson, the dear soul of 'en, as 'twere a miracle if he didn' send something to the temporarily bereaved Atwell family too, seeing you couden' look for 'en to have too much sense and him that high-learnt.

A CENTURY OLD

The south-east wind brought up the snow, and wrapped the common in a dazzling shroud, and then the mild sea-damp that is never long absent from sea-bound Somerset rolled up too and dulled the glitter of the frozen snow with a faint clinging mist, chilly and tremulous, and as silent as death. All the furze was hidden under a shapeless fall of snow, but the two barrows on the crest of the common stood up dark above the prevailing whiteness because the wind had blown the snow off their exposed tops, although it lay drifted deep on the windward side below. Dense clumps of evergreen in the hedges skirting the open, holly and yew and great ivy-bushes, rose in sullen masses above the soft melancholy whiteness round like a sturdy protest against the illusion of death that was hiding all the world. You could not see more than two hundred yards ahead through the mist, though it was light with a kind of luminous deadness. It was Mrs Dando's hundredth birthday on that misty morning, and although, after ninety-nine birthdays, it could hardly be supposed that another one would make much difference,

especially as birthdays do not arrive suddenly, still, the completion of a century of such anniversaries seemed to require a visit of ceremony.

There were other creatures that had not yet kept an anniversary of their birthdays on the common on that misty morning. A few cottagers keep one or two sheep who graze by the common, and there in the snow were some woolly lambs standing up on tottering black legs, and gazing at the passer-by in the mist with the amazed eyes of the newly born. The severity of the elements seems kind to these tender creatures, who suffer less from snow than rain, and the panting ewe-mother in the lee of the hedge gives all they need of shelter and warmth and food. And there were other things shyer than the lambs, who have an inherited tolerance of human beings, fascinating strange things that hid and nestled and avoided human inquisitiveness as if they had belonged to another planet. Beneath the furze and bushes there was a mysterious rustling of unseen life under frozen boughs: tiny hidden feet pattering on dead leaves as some soft feathery thing edged farther away from the passing stranger, rustling things, stirring invisible somewhere, everywhere a bewitching sense of hidden presences, soft furred or feathered creatures unseen watching out of the speechless world that borders ours with anxious bright eyes. The path winds down

the common and the steep street, and up again to the sheltered row of cottages where Mrs Dando lives, quite out of the domain of these sweet, wild creatures, whose happy lives are crowded into a span beside which her long hundred years must seem nearly an eternity.

In view of the fact that a hundred years of life must deepen a hundredfold one's experience of life's limitations, it seems an indecorum, in the face of Nature, for Mrs Dando to be so proud of her age. But then that passing of four generations, which has so greatly changed the face of the world and the history of nations, has done little more to Mrs Dando than to multiply a hundredfold the wrinkles in her withered old face What are wars and empires, the wreck of kingdoms and the commerce of nations, to Mrs Dando on the edge of a Somerset common! "When I wer' a maid," says she, "feyther a did hev' eight shillin' weekly an' nine o' we to feed, an' tea wer' eight shillin' a pound. 'Tis less nor that now, look." And when "Minister's maid" visits her, she collects her poor old faculties for an appropriate remark. "Aw theer," says she, "I do zay my prayers reglar, I do, and thank the Lard every marnin' vur bringin' I to another day"; and at this point her attention wanders to her visitor's basket, whence, if the leg of a duck or such small dainty should be forthcoming, Mrs Dando will become more expansive. She has a letter which

came "clane from Australy, a girt ways off, they do tell I," for she has kindred there; but she is more interested in the different Dandos departed and buried in Wansdyke Churchyard, because that presents a more definite idea to her mind. And then she will tell you that she was "drafted" last year, and show you her photograph with a childish pleasure in the likeness.

If we were all wise in proportion to our experience and virtuous in proportion to our blessings, how many moralists would be out of work? Now John Andrews says Mrs Dando is worldly; and if you dared you would laugh to hear such a ponderous word applied to such a little, helpless, withered old woman, a century old. Only nobody dares contradict John, because he is conscience, oracle, and director to the village. John is still a young man, but he was hurt in a mining accident and had his spine damaged years ago and ever since he has been slowly wasting inch by inch. His limbs are helpless and terribly twisted, and he has lately become blind, which is a terrible deprivation to poor John, since now, with "Wisdom at one entrance quite shut out," he has to depend on charity for his reading. But though John's thread of life is so pitifully frail, he has a mounting spirit that refuses to be held within four walls like poor old Mrs Dando. In the days of his youth he aspired

to be a Labour Member, and the habit of reformation seems to become stronger as his body gets weaker. John is always ready to show the village the right way to walk in. He is always suffering, and very seldom complains. He lies in the dark and thinks, because that is the only escape from his prison. One or two visitors come regularly and read to him, and he likes books of solid order, that give him "something to feed on," as he says. He never spares the lash; but all the same, the village regards him with a chastened admiration because he is a vicarious conscience to it. John has no opinion of Mrs Dando. "Her thoughts," says he, "is not fixed as where they should. *She* don't think where she's going to,"—which bald statement of fact comes with a shock upon those accustomed to hear certain truths expressed with more reserve. But the directness of speech and thought natural to the poor appeals to their own class as more polished phrasing never could. Once when a great, strong, young man, with a clumsy attempt at sympathy, compared his own big, healthy frame with John's wasted body—"Young man," said John, rolling sightless eyes at him, "are *you* prepared for eternity?" John knows quite well that, however small the house of life may be, it is always possible to look out of the window, because his sister, who lives with him and nurses him unceasingly, belongs to the order

of those who possess all things when they have nothing.

Mary Andrews is a great sufferer, though most uncomplaining, and the chief dread of these two is that Mary, upon whom John is absolutely dependent, should be taken first. But though Mary herself is so frail, her cottage is as neat as a new acorn-cup, and she is always so busy with her house and her invalid that she has only time for the briefest excursion, in clogs, to a sick neighbour's or the village shop. Constant anxiety and pain and weariness have seamed her face with long sad lines; but they have also made it beautiful, and she is the very model of Saint Anne. For all her care, Mary is never out of humour, but has always the same grave, cheerful tranquillity, and reveres John as the wisest and best of men.

Mary says: "Us do make our own joys, I reckon," and some people think that the uncomfortable parts of life are exactly those which make it best worth living. However that may be, Mrs Dando's experience of the "aching joys" of life cannot be very large, or she would never have been so unconscionable as to go on lasting a hundred years in the face of it. But perhaps Mary is right about the joys we make ourselves. For though she and John are to all appearance much less comfortable than Mrs Dando, they do not think her lot enviable. The grievousness

of poverty is when it cramps growth, and there are certain ways of growth equally accessible to poor and rich—labour and anxiety for children and kindred, the beloved and the dependent. Mrs Dando missed that way, and John does not consider that being a hundred years old is any excuse, because

"The soul's dark cottage, battered and decayed,
Lets in new light through chinks that Time hath made";

and in view of the fact that neither he nor Mary has chosen to be imprisoned within the narrowness entailed by poverty of all things, he may be excused for reflecting that a hundred chinks have let very little light into the particular dark cottage which Mrs Dando's soul inhabits. The truth is that most of us choose a prison and stop inside it of our own accord. The cell may be wide or narrow according to conditions, but is nevertheless a prison. It seems as if there were a deep-rooted instinct that drives civilised man to shut himself up close inside any protection that can part him from the greater elements outside. So that the creatures which are born destitute, as we reckon destitution, have a wider inheritance not of their own choosing. Those who are very poor, or very wise, may find out the enchanted place where poverty is a deed of possession, admitting the owner to a share in the wide inheritance of the wild things born on

the common to short lives and poverty. The lambs that gaze out on the snowbound heath with the amazed eyes of things newly past the threshold of a world of unimagined limitations are not in much poorer case than Mrs Dando shut up inside the shell of a hundred years' hardening. For although Mrs Dando does not share the intellectual privileges that John Andrews values so highly, there are still other possessions to which the poorest have a right, in the universal brotherhood of simple creatures, furred, feathered, or human. "There's night and day, brother, both sweet things; there's sun and moon and stars, brother, all sweet things. There's likewise a wind on the heath." But while the wind blows on the heath those who have houses stay inside them.

There is (or was) a brown donkey who draws up water from the well at Carisbrooke by trotting an unending course inside a great wheel. And whether buckets go up or down, and whether Kings or trippers stand by to watch, the meek involuntary moralist goes on trotting inside his enclosing wheel, never getting any further on and never looking away from his own patient brown legs. The brown donkey did not choose his wheel; but most of his human prototypes from sheer force of habit endure a voluntary servitude inside a different wheel which turns perpetually one way and dulls the senses that

might have been listening to the wind on the heath. Sometimes there are a few desperate struggles to get away from the ceaseless turning, but the fatal circle closes in, until another wheel is broken at the cistern and we turn no more.

THE WATERCRESS BED

THE watercress bed lies on the low side of the churchyard hedge, and the brook flows through it but it does not rise there. The chief source of the brook is a spring that rises on the upper side of the hedge, bubbling up in a green hollow of the hawthorns with meadow-sweet and long grasses dipping into it, and two flat stones steadying the edge for those who come to draw water. The tall grey tower looks down on it, but it is too small to reflect anything but the hawthorns. It is never dry, that spring, and is held to make better tea than any other water in the village. Beyond the tower, on the upper side of the churchyard, the high, tottering tombstones lean every way to look down on the brook, and the broken cross, and the watercress bed lying, a shimmering green patch, in the middle of the "ponded" waters out of which the gables and grey mullions of the Court Farm rise as if the house were actually built in the stream itself. But it really stands on the edge, and behind it there is a field running up towards the common that is yellow with a nodding crowd of cowslips every May. There are springs in that field too,

but they run underneath the cowslip leaves so that you do not see them till your feet are wet through. Further up the road another tributary of the brook runs by the inn and the schoolhouse and dives under the bridge, which is the gathering place of the male section of Sunday congregations when chapel is about to stop singing and Sunday dinner is nearly ready within doors. But that spring is sometimes dry, and then the churchyard brook has to feed the watercress bed all by itself.

If you were unversed in the secretive ways of Somerset villages you would think this village ended with the watercresses, but it does nothing of the sort. It spreads out long, straggling arms up the hills and over the common, towards Pixy Hole and Goblin Combe and Paradise, and then there is another one lying "after the brook" along the valley that narrows towards the foot of Mendip. But the existence of houses there is only hinted at in stray stone gables and chimneys that peer out from orchard trees and great elms and the willow-tangle near the bed of the stream; for the brook is really a stream of consideration. After it leaves the watercress bed, with a mighty splashing over a drop of at least four feet, it goes on in something of a hurry to the end of the cowslip field, which it quits in a veritable cascade, hurling itself over a ten-foot buttress of stone to plunge deep down in a ferny channel, along which

it pursues a hidden course for some two miles. When Domesday book was written the brook was busy turning the wheels of a mill that ground corn for the village. There is still a mill on the place though Wansdyke bread is not made now of home-grown corn. It became a cloth mill later on, and that too is a dead industry, but Dyers still live at the Mill Farm though they dye no longer.

The Mill Farm stands close by the brook, and three big ponds lie behind the house and the old wheel, that has lain idle for who knows how many generations. They are green and stagnant now, these ponds, and never used except by excursive ducks that come poaching now and then. A big patch of osiers grows by the last one, and the upper pool is "ponded" above the level of the house door. A tangle of sallow and hazel lies about the banks, covered in February with a tawny drift of lambstail catkins and spikes of silver palm. A low fence screens the mill ponds from the Mill Farm and keeps the numerous brood of young Dyers from tumbling into the pools where the moor-hen trips secure across broad lily leaves and nests in the shadow of willows and water herbs. The house itself is a monument of antiquity, hoary thatch covers a roof of inconceivable crookedness and all the broad stone chimneys stand askew with the gables. A footway of uneven flags crosses the

miry barton in a descent to the house door, which is sunk still further down two steps. From the garden corner a great apple-tree, standing roof-high, leans sideways to the low porch, and its branches sweep so close that in May the kitchen floor is drifted over with pink blossom. The fields rise up suddenly on the far side of the brook, and the orchard hides the Mill Farm from the road, so you follow the steep twisting lane that leads down from it in faith that it will eventually lead somewhere. And it does lead into Abraham Dyer's "barken," and there it stops.

Dyer was a small farmer and haulier, a man remarkable for breadth of figure and serenity of soul. To most people the providing a living for such a "long" family as his would seem a precarious and anxious task. But Dyer's placid countenance was never ruffled by any shadow of misgiving. The extraordinary solidity of his figure may have had something to do with the steadiness of his mind. He looked rather like a gigantic humming-top, being somehow or other—and especially in his working clothes—immensely wide about the middle and appearing to taper towards both ends. The suggestion was so strong that catching sight of Dyer too suddenly you were liable to become possessed by a wild desire to spin him.

The scattered land, and his hauling work, kept

Dyer much away from the old house and the miry ways, so that the Mill Farm was silent enough for most of the day. But early in the mornings more children than you could have believed possible used to come tumbling up out of the "barken" and take the road to school when the puxy of the fields was too deep for small feet to struggle with. They looked more than a dozen, but there were really only nine boys and girls of assorted sizes, all under thirteen. They were accompanied out of earshot by admonitions from the shadow of the house door not to michy nor later nor stand in puddles, but whence the voice came could not be seen, because Thyrza, who belonged to it, was generally busy with the churn or the washtub, or the kneading trough or the sewing machine, as became one responsible for the well-being of such a "long vamley."

Thyrza was eighteen. She was the eldest of all, and the prop of the house since her own mother died, long ago. Since then Thyrza had accepted two stepmothers in succession with perfect equanimity, for it never occurred to her that Feyther should go on being a "widow," and always whoever came to it Thyrza remained practically the head of the house. The stepmothers were even-tempered, placid women, who went on lengthening a family already long enough, and allowed the chief share of household re-

sponsibilities to devolve on Thyrza's shoulders, who accepted it all as in the natural course of things. Thyrza was large and solid and fair-faced, like all the Dyers ; she was rather serious since she saw no need to be otherwise, and the seriousness suited the blue eyes which Thyrza shared with the rest of her family. All of them, from Abraham down to the last baby, took a serious outlook upon life from eyes as blue as forget-me-nots under water. Serious and placid as she was, Thyrza never seemed to take any interest in the chief end of life, which, in Wansdyke, is getting married. Her stepmother deplored this, having the desire of every really excellent woman that others should be as she. But Thyrza had enough to do with her brothers and sisters, and it was she alone who was certain about the right order and quantity of the family. "Feyther" never remembered the exact succession of his offspring, because the reigning baby was always the centre of interest. And then there were two elder ones away at work, and three had been buried at odd times during epidemics which came when the springs were dry. There had been two sets of twins, but those were now uneven numbers, though a casual observer might have supposed most of the smaller Dyers to be twins, so slight to an unaccustomed eye were the shades of difference between them, and so strong was the mutual resemblance of their several pairs of

eyes, all of the same serious blue like drowned forget-me-nots. Even the stepmothers occasionally lost count, but Thyrza never did.

It all began when Ralph, the youngest but one, got his first pair of trousers, and stated that he was going to church. Ralph was completely square, with a serious face and prodigiously stout legs. He seldom ran because his figure did not permit agility, but he always wanted to do whatever Joe, the brother of nine, happened to be doing just then. Joe, in company with a mixed assortment of young Dyers, used to go to church every Sunday in procession, with large round collars to their Sunday suits and highly-soaped solemn faces. They sat in rows and never moved an eyelid all through the sermon, and marched back home afterwards in file with Thyrza bringing up the rear. When Ralph expressed his intention of going to church too, Thyrza said "Surely," but Joe, jeering, said, "Thou cassn't mount up there, thou's too fat." Ralph, breathing hard, his only sign of offence, said, "A'm a'gwain, so I be," and go he did next Sunday.

But coming back again the road was long, and the sun was high and hot, and Ralph's legs, though stout, carried weight. He all but gave in. Stopping short near the beginning of the last long lane he said, "Ah'd hev' had my carriage if I wasn't that big." Joe jeered, friendly-wise, meaning to spur on his younger brother, when a

large tear, collecting gradually in Ralph's eye, started a slow trickle down his nose, and Thyrza, coming up at that moment, began distributing her prayerbook and umbrella in preparation for carrying her stout brother the rest of the way. It was at this moment that a brown-faced man in corduroys came through the next gate, and, noticing the tears, said cheerfully, "Now then, mate, comes along o' I," and hoisted Ralph on his back, and the latter, after looking carefully up and down the lane to make sure that no stranger was in sight, condescended to be carried all the rest of the way home with his stout legs sticking bravely out on either side of a back that was much too broad to be comfortable.

The burly friend, depositing Ralph by the barton gate, saluted the rest of the family with a nod and strode off. Ralph, questioned about his new acquaintance, said with importance that he did know 'en very well and had helped 'en with the pegs. It turned out to be the new arrival at the Court Farm, who had come back from Canada after the old uncle died in the spring, and no one seemed quite sure who was coming to take possession of the old house and the watercress bed. Not very much was known of him, for he had gone out to Canada quite young, and he was known to have married there and to have been getting on well. But then the village heard vaguely that the wife and her baby had died, and

nothing more was heard for a long time because the old uncle was not communicative. Now he had cleared up the mystery by coming back, alone, to the old farm, and people said he must have made money, for the old man would never have left his property to one who had none of his own. But the younger Pearce seemed silent and retiring; so far his neighbours had seen little of him, and most of his land lay away from the village street, "after the brook," towards the Mill Farm.

After this it not infrequently happened that the Dyer procession fell in with John Pearce on their way to church or chapel. And once it happened that he came into the Dyers' barton when Thyrza was there feeding the baby ducks with a baby child—a yellow-headed, toddling thing like a young duck—"purling" unsteadily on the broken flags and clutching at her skirts with gurgles of joy over the pattering yellow brood. Pearce, who had come to ask the father Dyer about some farm machine, finished his conversation and said Good-night. He stopped when he reached the barton gate and turned round again to look at the yellow ducklings and the yellow-headed child. Thyrza went away presently with her bowl of meal, and Abraham waited, thinking his visitor might have something more to say. But Pearce said no more; the true countryman is not lavish of words, perhaps it is part of country wisdom to know that one half of the things in this world is not worth saying

and the other half has already been said. So John turned round and went away back to his lonely house without saying any more.

The winter lasted very long, so long that it seemed as if the spring would never come. The cleaving of sods and loosening of springs that come with February Fill-dyke never came that year, for the earth was bound hard all the month with a black frost and no ploughing could be done on the land that was like iron. It yielded as last, and March was soft, and at the end of March the snow came. It was the snow that began the change in the Court Farm beside the watercress bed.

It happened this way. Dyer had gone away early to the monthly cattle market at Upton, two miles away, when an urgent message came about some hauling that was to be done in the morning. The elder children were at school, so Thyrza and Ralph went after Feyther with the message. He came back with them when the fair was over. It was a day of pale sunshine, and all the air was a transparency of unseen moisture. The winds were swirling unsteadily between point and point, but the sky seemed clear, when all at once by the cross roads the snow came upon them, driven up the valley in a whirling wreath, luminous like a spectre with a soft unearthly radiance. The driving network of flakes blotted out the sun from the heavens

and hid the world in a shroud of incomparable soft whiteness, muffling every sound and changing the clear outlines of earth with incredible swiftness and silence. It had come driving in such haste that the cattle at graze were caught before they could think of shelter; they stood still and stupefied in the pastures while the world around became transformed, and the sheep, kneeling to nibble, remained kneeling in dull amazement while the grass under their noses grew white with snow, and white piles drifted high on their motionless woolly backs. The cloud drove through the length of the valley and went away as suddenly as it had come. It went northwards before the wind, a dun glimmering mist now with the sun high over it. The whitened hilltop shone above it and the whitened meadows below, and in the middle went the wraith-like mystery driving out of sight behind the hills.

For a few moments the world seemed stricken dumb by enchantment. The cattle stood motionless in the snow, and in the universal silence the three sheltering under a penthouse were almost startled by the sudden appearance of a man at the cross-ways. It was John Pearce coming down from the cowslip field. The storm had caught him sideways so that one sleeve and shoulder was white, and the brim of his hat on one side was drifted full of snowflakes, but the other side was untouched, and he carried a lamb under his

arm tucked inside his coat. Its wee black face peeped out into the world with eyes of blank amazement. Ralph hailed his friend with delight and demanded to see the lamb. It had just come into the world as one of three, and was to be brought up within doors by hand, since the mother found two enough for her. Ralph expressed his intention of seeing the lamb fed and put to bed, and Pearce, rather diffidently, suggested that Dyer might "step in a moment" and look at a new piece of farm gear that had just arrived. Thyrza demurred, but Ralph was firm. They crossed the watercress bed and went into the Court Farm together. In the big, empty kitchen John Pearce blew up the fire and settled the new-born lamb in a basket near before he began preparations for feeding it. Thyrza watched his operations with surprise at the dexterity of the hands that looked so big and clumsy, and a half-conscious pang of sympathy stirred her heart as she thought of the wife and child both dead in a strange land. John Pearce showed no uncertainty about his nursing operations, but the steady gaze of the three pairs of blue eyes seemed to embarrass him. He said little until the lamb was wrapped up in a blanket and supplied with a large bottle of milk. Then he suggested, briefly, that they should go into the outhouses to inspect the harrow. Over its technical points both men waxed eloquent, and

John's awkwardness had vanished by the time they came back to the kitchen fire. Ralph, having satisfied his curiosity about the infant lamb, started on an excursion round the room and demanded information respecting a huge baize-covered thing of curious shape standing in a corner behind the settle. "That," said John, "that be my grandfeyther's old double bass viol that he did play on in church when the old singers with the flute and sarpint did used to play up in gallery." "That were before thic here new organ were put up," said Dyer, disparagingly; "a gurt clumsy thing he be too, and don't play half the rare old tunes they did used to have when I were a boy." "Can 'ee play 'en?" asked Ralph, with round eyes of respect. "Well," Pearce replied with modesty, "I cassn't play 'en not to say proper like. 'The Old Hundredth,' now, and plain tunes like that, I can manage they, but when you do come to the turns in 'Shepherds watched,' 'tis awkward to get round the carners quick enough in a manner o' speaking. 'Tes but the plain tunes I can manage, look. Grandfeyther he were wonderful clever wi' the old fiddle, and many a time I do sit here alone and look at 'en and think what a power o' tunes there be in his inside if only a body could get at them; a powerful lot there must be, and bless 'ee, 'tes martal comfortin' to sit here when anybody be

all alone like and think what a deal o' music there be inside old fiddle. Only I can't get 'en out, not by myself like." He looked at it rather wistfully.

"Thy grandfeyther," said Dyer, "I mind 'en well, he were a wonderful man at a song, now." "Truly," Pearce answered, "Grandveyther he could sing the day long and niver look at a book for 'en ayther. Grandveyther's songs were all inside's head, and a rare store he had too. An' niver didn' want no pianner to sing to, like chaps nowadays, but he mid hev' somebody by, that were all. Dedn' sing much to's work, didn' grandveyther, but did take I, when were a youngster, between's knees and sing song after song; I can mind many o' 'en now: rare songs they were for singin' too. Did used to sing to each other in those days when old church band did play every man his own instrument, but folk don't play old tunes with fiddles and such now, these new organ things wi' belluses, they've driven out the old tunes. One man to do the whole lot for everybody, an' 'tes tunes from books to-day and naught else." "So it be," said Dyer, "'tes one man to one trade nowadays, an' young men cann't turn their hand to anything as could when I wer' young. Folk do buy bread 'stead o' makin', and want butcher's meat, and wives do buy children's clothes as ought to make theirselves. 'Tes only one thing at a time now,

and games for all the boys till what wi' cricket and football there'm not one can stand up to a zyve or a sickle nowheres. Our Joe, he'm a good boy wi' a zyve tho' he ben't but nine year old. I mind when I wer' a boy, us did quit school at nine, and many's a time I've a'went leasin' all day from sunrise or walked behind haywainses twenty mile to get a few pence, and been out at four on a winter's morning cutting rexen till did cry wi' the cold, an' could make bread for mother so well's a maid. But there'm too much book-larnin' to-day, boys cann't do but the one thing, and they'm too proud to work when do bide to school so long.

"Well," said Pearce, reflectively, "there'm some folk do seem able to think of a power o' things to onst. I mind when I did see a little chap in Canada mid hev' had a wonderful head to keep things in, for he were a-gettin' his supper, and a-warmin' his feet, and a-sayin' his prayers, all at a time. 'Twere martal clever to think of it all together, an' him but a little chap. Anybody do learn to think when he do always bide alone, but you don't look for it from the young ones."

Thyrza was looking at him with an undefined trouble on her benign face. He stopped suddenly and fell back into his first awkward shyness until Dyer thought it was time to be getting along home. Ralph undertook to come back again and

visit the lamb. "An' I'd be martal glad to see you wheniver ye do come," said John on the threshold wistfully. Thyrza's blue eyes were still troubled as she went away past the watercress bed to the Mill Farm in the valley.

After the snows the flowers came. Primroses covered half the earth that April, and before they were gone the bluebells came and lay in the grass in blue flame-like shadows. Under the hedges of the home-field the ramasons were clustering in masses of shimmering lily-like leaves, but the starry white flower-heads were hardly in blossom yet. Here and there they lay in glossy patches along the bank; you saw their long-pointed leaves bending sideways all together in a crowd as the wind ran over them. Thyrza, in her long blue pinafore, was moving from patch to patch of the ramasons with a pail of whitewash in her hand, leaving behind her a ruthless trail of white lime splashed all over the plants, to keep the cows from nibbling them, because the flavour of garlic spoils the butter. The field rose in a long slope towards ploughlands up above, and in the upper hedge a row of elm-trees stood between the furrowed lands and the green pasture. Their great branches swept downwards in long curves with the perfect grace of elms new-fledged, and the delicate buds yet only half unfolded spread like a faint diaphanous veil of green between the world and the blue above it. The sky was full

of the incessant movement of driving clouds, hanging low on the hilltop until they seemed to lean on the furrows going away in long straight lines to touch the sky. Out of them all a grey storm-cloud came suddenly over the crest of the hill, driven before the wind, its edge ragged and streaming. Thyrza, looking up as the sunlight became suddenly wan, saw the approaching storm and fled to the shelter of the elm-hedge. The young leaves could afford little protection, but close by was a mass of ancient yew that had been polled and clipped until it spread wide along the hedge. Its stems were twisting and gaping, and the spaces between filled with flat interlacing boughs of solemn green. Thyrza, pressing into the dense shelter, looked through a space in the boughs towards the coming storm. It was driving fast upon her, and the arrows of rain already began to clatter against the resistance of the yew hedge. They came driving aslant in a wild onslaught, and behind them rolled the cloud dark and heavy covering half the sky. All the bird-songs and the shrill clamour of the tits had become silent before the assault of the storm; the world was full of a hurry and fury of rain. It came driving down the furrows with headlong speed, and out of its heart the heads of two horses rose above the crest of the hill, nodding in a steady, slow movement unhurried among the frenzied elements. They mounted deliberately, and, rounding the summit, paused for

a moment on the hill-top with the storm behind them, and then John Pearce's voice said, "Coom up, my deears," as they began to move down the field. The plough behind them cleft the furrow steadily as they went, and the ploughman leaned backwards throwing his weight against the slope. The unmoved careful progress of the team seemed quite untroubled by the storm's driving frenzy as it raced past them right and left. When they reached the hedge John clicked the horses close up near the yew and stayed for a moment looking around for shelter, while the team stood patient, heads down and plaited tails turned to the storm, which all at once became hail and swept over the earth in a rattling volley. The field became white, and the grasses whitened as they bent beneath the weight of the hailstones. A wan shadow ran over the face of the earth like a reminder that all flesh is grass. John, whistling beyond the hedge, came close to the yew bush, and, stooping to it with the horses' heads at his shoulder, parted the twigs to look through. All at once the whistling stopped as he caught sight of a blue pinafore fluttering there in the shelter of the yew boughs. He stood quite still for a moment, and then, pressing up to the hedge regardless of the hail driving at his back, he began parting the boughs hastily with both hands to get a better view. As he leant this way and that trying to widen the spaces, Thyrza turned aside and appeared to busy herself

about the pail of whitewash, which needed no attention. She lifted it carefully with a great pretence of trying to find a safer place. The hail-stones "dapping" all about and rattling on the leaves like miniature artillery, appeared at first to drown the voice on the other side of the yew hedge calling rather anxiously. John made a place at last and peered through a gap in the thick screen, holding the boughs with both hands away from his face. Thyrza looked round then, and looked back again at the bucket with an air of concern. John spoke eagerly through the branches, "How come 'ee there out in the starm? 'Ee'll be so wet as can be and no cloak to thee." "Nay," said Thyrza, indifferently, "I don't think, 'tis a lew place by here, the storm do dreäve around by your side, but I'm dry enough." John did not seem content, he pulled the boughs from side to side, peering between the tough trunks to see how things were. The hail drove furiously against the patient team, but their master was heedless of them. Thyrza, standing in the shelter with her back half turned to him in tantalising nearness quite unapproachable, seemed to occupy all his attention. She spoke at last without looking at him. "I do fear you'll get tur'ble wet by there i' the rain, and th' harses too, poor beasteses." John hardly seemed to hear what she said as he wrenched at the tough yew stems and spoke as much to himself as to her. "It be a queer thing,"

he said, "I did look through the hedge towards thy house, a-thinking o' thee, and there thou wert so nigh all the while." Thyrza's pretty grave face suddenly flushed scarlet. She turned quickly round, putting up both hands to the ruffled hair that the wind teased round her face. "I think the storm do pass," she said, "I'll be getting home again." "Nay," John said anxiously, "do 'ee bide a while, thou'lt be drenched, the hail do dreäve like a whiplash." "Then why don't 'ee go yonder in the lew o' the haymow?" asked Thyrza through the hedge with an unusual touch of mockery in her tone. John made no direct answer, but a branch creaked as he bent back its green toughness into an arch. Thyrza started at the noise and instinctively put her hand out to the shaking sprays. John left the branch, and thrusting his arm right through caught her fingers. "Thyrza, my dear," he said, as if he were making a petition. Thyrza tried to pull her hand away but it was held fast. John found his tongue all at once. "Thyrza, my dear," said he, "won't 'ee come. I do want thee martal bad; do 'ee look at me then, my dear, Thyrza. . . ." but Thyrza would not look round. "Thou cassn't think," he went on, "how my heart did leap up when I did look droo hedge and see thee a cowerin' in the lew like a little gleanie, won't 'ee come, my dear, an'—drat they branches," as the displaced stem sprang back with a sudden rebound. Thyrza

looked round at that with tears on her face which horrified poor John. "Now mercy o' me, what a gurt fool I be," said he in despairing penitence, "a hurtin' thy little wristeses wi' they boughs." He flattened himself into the hedge trying to clear her from the boughs without loosening his hold. But after he had wrenched in vain for a minute or two, Thyrza turned round again without speaking, and put her other hand beside the first one.

John, through the yew gap, regarded her with a beatified countenance, mouth open in speechless ecstasy. He looked at the two small hands encircling his large hard one, as if he doubted whether they were quite real, and was afraid to try. Then he looked again at Thyrza's face with a mixture of rapture and misgiving; her blue eyes had regained their usual expression of serious benignity, but she said nothing, and John dared not speak for fear of waking up and finding Thyrza and the yew hedge vanished in a dream. There is no saying how long the situation might have lasted thus, if it had not been for a sudden rush at the lower end of the field. There was a wild stampeding of small hoofs, and a plunging mass of woolly grey bodies dashed headlong through a weak place in the hedge, as a score of sheep made for the gate leading to the open road as if their lives depended on getting through it within about five seconds. The beatified pair on either side

of the yew hedge dropped hands simultaneously and fled with precipitation, Thyrza down the field and John towards the nearest gate with intent to cut off the fugitives at an angle. The woolly idiots seemed possessed by an imp of perversity, and it was some time later that John and Thyrza, having "shooed" them at last into safety, found themselves near the barton walking together half mechanically in the direction of the house. The ways of the world had changed all at once, and the new order of things was still unrealised and incalculable. Neither spoke for a while, at last John broke the silence. "Sheep," said he reflectively, "be that simple. They don't seem to know what do rightly want, let alone what be good for 'em. As if any witty beast, having got a good pasture, wouldn't be content and bide there." He looked towards the house door where the stepmother was shading her eyes against the sun that shone out now as if there had never been a hail cloud in the sky. The two came walking towards her regardless of the patient team still waiting in the hedge above. "You'm welcome, Measter Pearce," she called as though she were expecting him. Then John stopped short all at once, as if he had just waked up out of a dream. He looked round at Thyrza with a falling face. "My dear," he said, doubtful and hesitating, "be sure thou dost know what art doing? I ben't so young as some o' the others,

an' the old house be martal lonesome. Art thou quite sure thou dost understand . . . ?" Thyrza laughed for the first time since John had known her, and put her hand out to him again. "I do think," she said, "thou'rt very near so simple as thy own sheep."

BABYLON

Babylon lies on a knoll above a valley winding eastward, inland between hills, where in olden days the Channel washed the foot of Mendip. The valley is reclaimed now, tilled and ploughed and planted, a green land full of orchards and tall trees that bury the houses, so that in summer a stranger might believe the great church-tower standing up midway in the valley was a sanctuary in a forgotten land or a city forsaken, like some vision of enchantment from the "Arabian Nights."

Babylon is far away beyond the tower and the planted lands. It looks southward to the hills, and is a lonely place even in that lonely country where solitude broods like a spell, and where hamlets and homesteads, buried deep among the rifts of the hills, seem as if they must be homes of elfin folk, because utter silence lies there day-long while the men are away at work among the fields. Beyond the valley, on the sides of Mendip, there are villages and church-towers and long, straight roads, and on the lonely level of the hilltop larch-plantations break the sky-line and serve as landmarks. But Babylon lies all alone

among the low, steep spurs of Mendip that crowd together and hide the scattered farms, peopled by men who for generations have lived and died in their solitary homesteads shadowed by immemorial peace. The silence of the folded hills is an obsession, and people who live there know its spell. It lies about the heart like a presence haunting in shadowy hidden places; it broods there like a blessing, and is carried in and out through travel and noise and hurry, compelling those who have known it irresistibly back again to the old peace and the remembered silence.

The Wansdyke road crosses the hill near Babylon, and from its top you can see far and wide over the steep low knolls towards Mendip. Some of these have a scanty fringe of trees, pilled and polled and ill-grown for the most part, because the people thereabout are not "good livers" in the Somerset sense, which means that they fell all their available timber. This road is the straight thread in a confusion of forgotten lanes twisted about it like a tangled skein, old pack-roads some of them, older cattle-tracks perhaps some others, that wind low down between banks and end haphazard after a long series of curves, roads whose purpose and condition are falling slowly into oblivion and decay. Sometimes when the land is beleaguered, as often in a hoar frost, by a clinging mist, white and dense, that closes down like a pall, shutting away

these forsaken places from the outer world, and deadening all sounds of life, you could believe Babylon a place ensnared under witchcraft and magic. But there is a different magic in the breathing stillness of Spring, when she comes from the West with the wealth of wild flowers which is Somerset's glory. These buried lanes skirt innumerable orchards, old, gnarled, neglected, their boughs meeting sometimes across the paths, crossing and recrossing in a tangle of brown rune-shapes beneath a mass of blossom, while in the grass and the hedges and in all green shadows primroses spread a golden track to beguile, and still for hours together you may see no living creature except birds and a few cattle.

Why the place is called Babylon nobody can tell. The name lasts beyond the memory of the oldest inhabitants, and for anything they know it may have been called Babylon for all time. A study of the names of the fields in a country parish illuminates local history, revives memories of feuds, discoveries, claims, of old families that once owned the soil and made history, of countless parochial details. All sorts of quaint and curious field-names there are near Babylon — names historical, like Pennsylvania; names descriptive, like Look-about Batch, Wet Mead, Honey-hole, Gooseland, Three-corner Paddock; names reminiscent of local dealings, like Hard-and-Sharp and Great-coat Cleeves; or of local holdings, like Copylease

and Pepperlease. Then there are romantic names, like Little Perdigate, which has a flavour of Arthurian romance; grim names, like Bloody Paddock, which has an epic sound; grotesque names, debased from some nobler original, like Hoke and Pinchin; names expressive of local sarcasm, like Forty-Acre, which is a field comprising fourteen perches; suggestive names, like Apsall's and Poor Apsall's; or personal names, like Pearce's Leg, a long narrow field of uncertain shape. But the reason why Babylon was so named remains unguessed, and nobody can tell what forgotten bitterness of spirit led the first owners of the field to call it so. The name may have been given jesting on the little brook that runs tinkling in a place where brooks are few, or perhaps in sorrow of heart, remembering some lost inheritance of blessing and promise. Time goes on, and generations pass by almost unheeded, in these silent places where the voice of dead years speaks clearer than the living. Babylon used to belong to Jesse Pearce; but he died, and the place changed hands. Jesse was an old bachelor, gloomy and taciturn, and an excellent farmer, though he was suspected of being a Radical. He worked his farm with the help of one man whose old wife looked after the house. Jesse kept his affairs to himself, and bred beautiful cows, which he adored with a devotion he had

never been known to bestow on anything human. His sole parochial interest was a feud with the parson concerning some obscure point of tithing on which Jesse was obdurate. So he never went to church, and he lived so far away that his neighbours hardly missed him. Northern people have properly little fear of loneliness. The Danish strain is strong in parts of Somerset where Danish invaders were rife, and perhaps from them comes the instinct for such lonely homesteads as this by Babylon—a homestead like that where Olaf Peacock marshalled his stock long ago in the Iceland fells. There is another inheritance too, ineradicable in the English countryman, and that is his Northern forefathers' independence of hierarchic systems. It is a great deal older than the Protestant faith, and Jesse never forgave the parson.

The feud endured, and when the rector objected to Jesse shooting his rooks that trespassed on the cornlands, Jesse sent up a message to say that if parson was so mighty particular about his rooks he had better keep them in cages. It was shortly after this that Jesse took to his bed and a visitor came through Babylon to ask for him. The house stands at the lower end of the barton, below the road level, and with its back to it. To enter you go round the house and through a wicket into a garden where pansies grow, shadowed below

dense high laurel hedges that shut away the house even from sight of the lonely valley. Within the garden the house-door is buried deeper still, for there is a porch over it that turns, and the low side-entrance is half covered with a heavy curtain of jasmine. Passing in here out of the sunshine was like entering the Valley of the Shadow. No one was within, and the barton was deserted and quite still save for five pigs—pink and very happy in the sunshine. They were grouped round a tilted waggon, and all five busy scratching themselves, with grunts of satisfaction, against convenient projections of the cart. The simultaneous motion of their five pink persons, all poised at different angles and all slowly rubbing in opposite directions, had a grotesque fascination in the utter loneliness and silence of the place, until the ceaseless motion made the watcher giddy, and then the thing suddenly assumed the proportions of an absurd nightmare impossible to get away from. Jesse's old housekeeper broke the spell by coming in at the barton gate. "'Ess," she said, "he'm gone, and Parson didn' bury 'en, for he'd gone furrin; so Parson from Combe parish did put 'en in the dirt. Measter, a did always say, 'A wunn't hev thiccy fellow to put I in the dirt when I be carried out by town-end feet foremost,' a said. 'The land wer' mine,' said he, 'and Passon he hadn' no right to 'en, but I did best

'en,' a said. So Parson, he wer' gone somewheres, girt ways off, when Measter took sick, an' he says, 'Sarah,' says he, 'I'll best 'en yet. I did best 'en over the land, and I'll best 'en to my buryin',' says he; an' after that he didn' take no more heed. Racks of pain he wer' in, but a didn' cry out for naught, an' when I see the poor nose of 'en so keen's a razor, and him so like in the face to's brother that did die thirty year back, I did know how 'twould go. But a never cried out, only did pluck at sheet and speak low to hisself. 'My cow,' a did say, 'my dear beauty, A shann't niver see her no more,' an' the tears did run down over's cheeks. For he did love thiccy cow, look, so well's a Christian, and wouldn' niver let none milk her but I, for I did sing to she when I did milk, so milk would come easy, an' Measter, he did set thiccy cow above any o's kin. An' there he did fret, the dear soul, that he shouldn' see her no more. Nor didn', an' her a beauty too. But he bested Parson, did Measter, an' I reckon that wer' a rale comfort to 'en."

PIXY-LED

SOMERSET roads below Mendip are steep beyond the capacity of anybody except Somerset men and horses. They have a trick of startling you with an exaggerated descent at some sudden turn in the lane. Rounding the corner, you seem to have come all at once to the edge of the world, so abruptly does the ground fall away from the level, and the wheel-tracks ahead look as if they ran away over the rim of the solid earth, and were stopped by nothing but space and sky. But when you reach the brow the road is really going on all the while, and the illusion has only been one of those forms of deception peculiar to Somerset, which is a county possessing a larger quantity of curious things and people than any other region in the known universe. And even on the level roadways there is always an element of adventure, for many strange things may be shut in between the tangled hedges. In one lonely byway, according to local tradition, there is much buried treasure, hidden there long since by a highwayman who used to beset the road. The lane is now an impassable tangle of brambles and nettles, sunk deep between fields,

and hard to find unless you know where to look; but there lies a great hoard to enrich whoever can find it. And not far from the treasure-lane there is another one containing a pond which by common report is bottomless, and may reach through to the centre of the earth for anything the village people can tell to the contrary. At any rate, it has never been dry within the memory of man. Then there is the road that runs by the Stones, popularly called the Wedding, of which local authority asserts that no living man has ever been able to count them properly. A baker once went, so the story goes, with two baskets full of loaves, and swore he would tell the number by putting a loaf on each stone. But he never managed to tell it twice alike, despite the loaves. And if you are wise you avoid that place after dark.

In lonely places, among such steep hills as these, ancient traditions linger on in the life of to-day. But though most of the folk-lore tales are fading from the memory of the people, the primeval instinct of fear before unknown natural forces lasts on in the hearts of a people properly "pagan" by situation, and inheriting immemorial superstitions of bygone races. Local names preserve old ideas, to-day apparently forgotten, but surviving in kindred superstitions difficult to unearth because they are so deep-

rooted. Pixy Hole is such a name, and few people here can tell you what a pixy is. And, indeed, very few have occasion to know the name, for the place is so remote that scarcely any one ever needs to pass by it.

Pixy Hole lies just over a precipitous fall of the road that looks across the marsh up to the great gloom of Mendip shutting out half the sky. The hill is so steep that the shadows of men and horses coming up the road when the sun is low, far off beyond the end of the hills, are flung together in grotesque distortions, so that no one could recognise mortal antecedents in the queer goblin shapes sliding at their feet. But you can avoid shadows by reaching it southward from Babylon, scrambling down the fields till you come to the very bottom of all things, which is Pit Lane, buried so deep between banks that no wind ever blows there to shake the curtain of hart's-tongue that covers the banks and the limestone cuttings with a dense garment of green. But in storms the water races ankle-deep and the wind tears high overhead like a frenzied thing. The other end of Pit Lane rises up and turns you out on the cross-roads near Pixy Hole. There is one farm, and beyond that the land drops down abruptly to a utter desolation of marsh-land and water ruffled under the continual go-and-come of winds that sweep the length of the valley. Up above, the pinnacled tower of

a little church, standing all alone among the hills, lifts an immovable stony finger skywards. But Pixy Hole keeps out of sight of the finger; it lies lower down where the road falls as steep as a roof. The fields rise up above the road, so that you must climb the bank and mount a twisted stile before you get into Pixy Hole, which is a little meadow blue with knapweed in haytime and shadowed perpetually with the gloom of the great hills beyond. There is a thicket of stunted wind-blown oak, and a few ash-trees, and a tangle of thorn and bramble, behind which a little brook tinkles unseen, and the brambles weave an impenetrable defence before it with magnificent curving stems, crimson and leaden purple, spurred with thorns like steel, hollow-grooved for toughness, and bearing sparse symmetrical leaves like beaten iron. These are the only pixy traces about the place, and the reason of the name remains unexplained in the category of other things inexplicable—as, for instance, why ash-trees look wet in a midsummer drought; or why a furze thicket will make believe to present an impenetrable barrier of spikes, and then will yield a path to those who press in undaunted, as if it were a way through deep water; or why the wild things in a wood will at times beset the hair and clothes of the explorer with an altogether unvegetable malignity, and at other seasons let him (or her) pass by

unscathed. These are questions which the age of the world has left yet unsolved.

You can get no stories to-day about Pixy Hole. Fairies and pixies have left the traditions of the peasantry, but the old instinct which peopled the unknown with fears is ineradicable. The shadow-haunted imagination of their Northern forefathers in old days filled all the wastes with half-seen ghostly beings, beneficent or malign, "ettyns, and elves, and orkneys" lurking in twilit solitudes, and wide spaces where winds blow, moors and marshes and open hillsides. And the instinct is perdurable in the race. Neither education nor the parson can lay the ghost of pagan beliefs lurking in the heart of Somerset, because fear of unseen evil and the power of malignity are passions of deadly strength to last. Many an old woman in Mendip villages has a character for witchcraft, and is respected and shunned accordingly. "Her'll witch thee for sartin," is a warning not infrequently given now in the twentieth century. A short while since an old woman dying confessed how in earlier days she had borne some man a grudge and cast a spell on him, of which (or so she believed) he died. The "witching" included all such ancient magic as gathering herbs unseen at a certain time and burying them at night in a field with certain incantations, probably of the nature of one quoted in "Bygone Somerset" as

having been used within the last ten years by two old people. These two tried to injure an enemy by hanging up before the fire a sheep's heart stuck full of pins and chanting before it this charm—

> "It is not this heart I wish to burn,
> But the heart of a person I wish to turn,
> Wishing them neither peace nor rest
> Till they are dead and gone."

Since the fascinations of the occult and belief in "the wizards that peep and that mutter low down in the dust" are strong upon people of other rank and education, it is small wonder if in silent lonely places terror and mystery should take hold upon simple folks and subdue them to a blind terror of some power unknown, which is very mischievous in its results. Not always, however; there is a lighter side to it. Not far from Pixy Hole lives an old mole-catcher who is credited with occult powers. But he uses them for good, and cures many of the minor ills of life, including warts, which he removes in this manner. He touches the afflicted spot and looks upwards, muttering an incantation. The sufferer then has to rub the wart with a piece of elder-bark, throwing it away when he is certain of not being seen. The advantages of this system are clear. And since "a-catchin' o' moles" is, according to the West Country song, a trade

which teaches those who engage in it many secrets of the human heart, it seems possible that the old man has less faith than his patients in his occult powers. But his reputation and his revenue both prosper.

Now time-honoured superstitions do little harm to anybody, such, for instance, as that which holds it unlucky to give bellows for a wedding present, or that which sees a menace to some one in the house when a hearse comes back to the door after a funeral. The old sense remains of hidden mysterious ways apart from the human ways, yet crossing them for ever, like the pixies of the waste places. The pixy proper of folk-lore is less malign than teasing, a beguiling spirit of doubleness that sets you at odds with your own wits, which is the most uncomfortable thing that can happen to anybody in a world already sufficiently perplexing. And, indeed, something of this sense of the doubleness of things is necessary to keep us from being shut off too far from the unseen that claims some unknown sense within us with so exquisite a pang. But the blind terror of the unknown which forms the basis of religion among ignorant peoples is a malignant power that penetrates deep even in modern life. Nor does it lie only among the crude faiths and superstitions of the Mendip peasantry. Not far from Pixy Hole a road runs east and west above the length of the

valley, and from the far end you can see the Channel water shimmering in a golden streak beneath the sunset that lights the sky and the hills with colours as radiant as the foundations of the New Jerusalem. Twice every day all the year through you may meet on that road one of the saddest figures in the world—

> "The grave unto a soul,
> Holding the eternal spirit against her will,
> In the vile prison of afflicted breath."

It is a crazy man who believes himself under a curse and thinks the gates of Paradise are closed on him. So every day he goes to the hilltop where he can see the sunset beyond the hills, and when the light has faded the gates close once more and he goes home again. He never speaks, and walks very fast with his head down, and the thin, melancholy figure going up and down that beautiful road is one of the most pitiful things in the world. Somehow he has missed the blessed gift of happiness that keeps the world clean, and then it is that the old terrors of the unseen come to craze poor human wits and leave them a prey to the "hobgoblins and satyrs and dragons of the pit" which beset the dark ways of this Valley of Shadows and bring the dreadful brain-sickness that is beyond human power to cure. For in spite of all we

are told of superstitions and brain projections and the subliminal self, there is no skill which unlocks all the secrets

> "of that that's under lock and key:
> Man's soul."

TRAVELLER'S JOY

He was sitting in the hedge at the top of Pagan's Hill, on the stump of a felled ash-tree, and a tangle of seeded clematis spread a feathery grey cloud overhead and ran along on one side and the other of the quiet old figure so very still by the wayside. He had been sitting there a long time, much longer than it took to smoke the short black pipe he had been holding cold on his knee for nearly an hour. He did not appear to be waiting for anybody or expecting anything while he sat looking out at the world from his patient old eyes. The portion of the world within his range of vision was just then aflame with the mighty colours of a late autumn running on into winter. Below the steep fall of the hill there were horses ploughing near an avenue of elm-trees leading to a farmhouse. The autumn colours have a magnifying quality that makes the world seem larger than it really is, and looking down from above the horses were dwarfed at the foot of the big yellow trees that were like vast pillars reaching up to prop the sky. The whole valley was full of elms heavy in their unlightened waning yellow, but where the

rare beech-trees stood, they showed like a furnace-flame blazing up into the blue, and even their grey boles caught the reflection of the red-gold leaves thick-fallen on the ground beneath, so that the whole tree, trunk and branch, looked like a pillar of fire.

Up above here on the hillside the hedge was blown nearly bare of leaves; only the arresting silvery tangle of "traveller's joy" lay lightly along the top. The old man sitting below the wild clematis looked out over the valley less as if he were consciously admiring the beauty of earth than as if he himself were part of the whole scheme. It must have been some kind of satisfaction with the world around that kept him there for such a long time without moving.

A young man came down the lane before long with a load of stones. He was a very big sun-browned Somerset carter with fair hair, almost flaxen, shining above his deeply burned skin. He and the big horse went along with something of the same powerful heavy-gaited movement. The young man looked for a moment at the figure in the hedge and then nodded without speaking. The old man smiled at him without speaking either, and the movement gave his passionless old face an expression of immense benignity. The big young man sauntered a few yards further down the road, and then as the descent steepened he took from under his arm

with great composure a young larch-sapling, and thrust it between the wheel and the upper projection of the cart, making just such a primitive brake as giants in old days would have used as they went striding over the hills with a fir-pole for a walking-stick. The wheel grated against the rude brake and the big horse slowed his slow walk and wheeled a little. The young giant made some remark which the horse seemed to understand, and presently the cart appeared to tilt itself up and shoot out the load in a heap beside the hedge. Then they readjusted themselves and went away back over the brow of the hill. All this time the old man had not spoken at all and had not appeared to move. He went on sitting there, while the sound of wheels died away and the light grew low over the valley. Then another man came up the road with a pickaxe on his shoulder and his clothes stained red with ore. He went slowly too and rather stiffly, as if the earth that reared him and dyed him and gave him his livelihood had given him rheumatism too. He came painfully up the steep part of the hill, and when he neared the top he looked up at the traveller's joy in the hedge, and so caught sight of the other traveller sitting beside it. He smiled suddenly at the sight, and his face—younger than the old man's by more than twenty years—had exactly the same expression of benignity that the other's had worn

when he greeted the carter. He called out quickly in the idiom of Somerset children. "Our feyther," he said, and moved his stiff legs a little faster till he came close to the old man—"Our feyther . . . . how be?" The old man stood up and came to his son in the road, putting out his hand with grave dignity. "I be main well, my son," he said, and they talked a little. "How'm thy mother?" at last, and the younger man's careful face fell a little. "Her've a-bin very rough wi' her lungs," he said, "and can't do but little, the poor soul of her." His father looked concerned. "Ah," he said, "a righteous woman her be, an' good children all of you too that do help the two of us." His son looked deprecating. Could his father not come back home again? One house cost less to keep than two. But the old man refused. He was perfectly content as he was. He had left his own home years before to go away and live all by himself in another village some miles distant. He used to have periodical drinking-bouts and "knock the things about," and his wife, a timid conscientious body, could not bear it, so they had lived apart for years, while his children toiled and his grandchildren grew up in the place he had left. Now and then he would walk over to the neighbourhood of the home where he had been born and married and lived so long, and look across at the old house, but he went no nearer. He used to

visit his sons and their wives, who held "Feyther" in esteem because of his dignified manner and gentle speech. His children helped both father and mother out of the earnings for which they toiled hard, and of which they might have been supposed to need every penny for their own growing families. The old man took their help with perfect dignity, and was always benign and gentle to every living creature except during his periodical drinking-bouts. He seemed to have achieved the impossible feat of giving up almost every responsibility in life without losing personal dignity and the affection of his children. After they had talked awhile, the younger man took some coins from his pocket and gave them to his father, and then went stiffly up the road, looking out over the valley now and then with his anxious face. The old man stayed a little longer, and then he too turned to go. Under the wild clematis for a moment there was a bustling movement of things unseen, and all at once the air was full of birds flying. They fluttered in a cloud, darkening the air and filling the space between the hedges with the pulse of beating wings and shrill crying "Pinck, pin—n—nck—." Then they disappeared suddenly into the hedge a dozen yards in front of the traveller, and the rustling began again until he reached their point of disappearance, when out they all fluttered crying shrilly, and went on with their whimsical

game until the hedge ended, and they all flew away to a big wych-elm in the middle of a field and settled there, chirming together in its branches with a noise like a cutting-machine.

The old man paused to watch the birds with his benign face, and stood listening to their chirming as if it contented him. They were the autumn chaffinches, the "bachelor" birds who after September cast off all the cares of family life and congregate in flocks to live on the stubbles and pastures in a cheerful community. "Coelebs'" chaffinch is a sort of Jekyll-and-Hyde bird, if such a comparison with our clumsy human morals may be applied to creatures so ethereal. For six months in the year he is a poet, a lover, and an artist; for the remaining six he is a garrulous glutton who gobbles and gossips all day long, having packed off his wife somewhere with other people's wives in order, apparently, to devote himself to the discussion of politics or theology, since no other subjects could set masculine tongues wagging at such a rate.

The old man waited until the crowd of birds flew out of sight. Then he went tranquilly down the road and disappeared among the yellow elm-trees.

ILLUSION

Five roads lie round about the mines on the hill-top, but none of them leads in amongst the quarries themselves. High green hedges enclose the wheel-tracks all their red length, and shut them off from the "reddings" on the other side like the paths of a maze. You see the shafts and cuttings through the hedge and over the gates, but you do not arrive at them though the lanes wind never so. There is a road that will take you there, only that road begins far away in the middle of Greatstone Lane, where nobody ever goes except miners and one farmer who lives beyond. It has neither name nor end, that road; it leads straight into the reddings and stops short at the foot of a quarry as if with an ironical suggestion that the traveller should go further on still into the heart of the earth, deep underground in the track of rivers that plunge down primeval fissures in Mendip Hills, to follow who knows what hidden path in the darkness.

The crossways look rather like a great gnarled hand stretching out knotted fingers to grip the hill-top in a sinister clutch. The high road goes straight down across the valley to Mendip beyond,

but that is a modern contrivance, for the older roads turn off short some fifty yards beyond the cross, after the fashion of Somerset lanes where you seldom see far ahead. They are a proper "puxy," these narrow unmade ways, and primroses grow in myriads along the hedges, and white violets crowd each other to cover up the sinister red earth with a luxuriance of grace and sweetness. But the redness will keep showing again and again, and the wholesome green cannot hide its uncanny suggestion of threat and trickery, as if some strange thing might just be going to happen at the end of the deep red cart-ruts. On a dark night darkness lies like a pall on these five lanes. At the crossways there is a moment's feeling of space where the open sky spreads above, and after that the hedges shut you in with a blind oppression, and the night closes overhead like deep water.

The horses know the short way to the mines as well as the miners know it, that is just beyond the turn, through a gap in the hedge, fenced across by a clumsy bar ever since the night when poor Eli Baker went over the edge of the quarry, horse and cart and all, and was picked up the next morning with a broken neck. Many of the quarries are disused now, silted up in part with rubbish and wind-drift, and all overrun with golden furze and brambles with huge, thorny stems drooping into the grass, making an im-

pregnable refuge for rabbits and blackbirds and the small wild tribes of the wilderness. There are a few wind-bent ash-trees and a wonderful wide space of sky, and the hollow land below that parts Mendip and these hills is full of changeful reflections and shifting lights, and the hills beyond are sometimes deep purple with coming rain, and look so near that you might throw a pebble at them, and sometimes they are faint and far off like the mountains of Beulah or the hills of the Delectable Land seen in a vision.

The mines cease at the edge of the hill, and long meadows slope away and away to the valley, field after green field all smooth and peaceful, and there is no red earth any more. There is a little house down there, stone-walled and grey-thatched with moss on the broad chimneys, whence a thin blue curl of wood-smoke rises straight up under the shelter of the hill. There is no other house in sight, and the fields are wonderfully silent except for the voice of birds who cry and twitter there all day long. A footpath leads from the house to the mines above, winding zig-zag through a meadow where the autumn crocus grows, like a faint purple shadow lying on the face of the meadow, here in a deeper splendour of massed blossoms, there paler with straggling single flowers. The wind hardly bends these low things, they stand up straight and always very still like the pale immortal flowers in

the Elysian fields, and it seems as if those who lived near them should be peaceful and shadowy too. They are poisonous to cattle, these delicate crocus plants, and in the empty meadow where they grow their shadowy still beauty is like the peace of death.

The mines above are often deserted too; on some days you may find a dozen men at work, on others never a single miner. And in disused cuttings the floor of the quarry becomes quickly overgrown with a carpet of broad, flat coltsfoot leaves. April brings a crowd of stiff golden-headed flowers, but the leaves come later, heavy and thick-ribbed, covered underneath with dense white down, so that when they are tossed up by a wind running low along the ground before rain they become suddenly dun colour, as if death had come into the world hurrying before the storm clouds that turn the very sunlight wan.

There was something fluttering above the blown coltsfoot leaves in the quarry, something that seemed to drift fitfully like a leaf before the rain-wind that bent all the stiff spikes of furze sideways in a long dying wave. The fluttering faded thing was a woman's dress, a young woman, though she moved very slowly and went with her head bent down as if she were seeking something among the stones and coltsfoot leaves. She moved with a fitful aimless motion like a shrivelled thing caught in an eddy, as if the force of will

within her were quenched by some greater force of grievous despondency, stronger than the helpless life it swamped with such a piteous weight. It was Eli's wife coming to look for her husband as she had come years ago, after the miners had carried him into the little hut, and she found him lying there very still beneath a sheet. The horse was still at the quarry bottom, poor beast, with a broken neck like its master. The man had missed the main road in the darkness, and the horse, who knew the way to the quarries, had taken its master on the wrong track, and both went over the edge in the black night. It was ten years ago, when they had been three months married, and still, when the fit came on the poor thing, she would go back to the place to look for him, and come home again across the meadow where the crocus grows, weeping quietly with her head bent down.

THE WEEK BEFORE CHRISTMAS

"HERE be Doris feared to go whoam alone. Boys have been a tellin' her pack o' lies about the ghost to Parsonage Lane." Doris's rosy face was tearstained and pale when Mary Andrews looked at her, rather awe-stricken. "My dear lamb," she said, "thou shouldst mind Them as do guard thee, and not fear what thou canst not understand."

"Now, Mary, you be foolish," said John impatiently. "Why don't 'ee tell the maid right out as there be'nt no such things as ghosteses, and they gurt loobies should hev' a swap behind the ear for trying to frighten little maids. Run along, my dear, and goos wi' uncle Jem, he'm gwain home-along just now." And Doris trotted away after her uncle.

"Policeman do say he do know thiccy ghost," John went on angrily "—'tis naught but a gurt ivy-bush do stand high up pitching forward in hedge above Weaver's trap where the road do fall by the water-gout. He do stand up there above the rexen so dark, and pleeceman say he do often vancy 'tis Varmer a standing there by gate, and do look up to speak to'n, and 'tis but

the ivy-bush. And there be'nt no other ghost there, not as he do know by."

Granfer Dyer was of another opinion. "There'm more sights abroad than what us do always know," said he, taking his pipe out and looking at John. "And Weaver's Fatherlaw could have told 'ee better, for he did know my Veyther. Hevn't I a' told 'ee o' the zight my Feyther did see over to Park at Christmas time?"

John snorted, but said no more, because Granfer Dyer's story was an institution in the village.

"It were the week before Christmas," said the old man, "and my Veyther he were a terr'ble one for the Methodies, and he'd a-druv over to a meetin' to Bristol, and were coming back late, past Rectory and down by five gates, where 'ee know there'm a old road do come out that did used to be the old ancient way for all travellers before roadses were made proper. An' there'm a bit of him do come out all alone by himself in middle o' Park field, where they fir-trees do make a lew place for cattle, and do look still as if had been a bit o' old road as somebody had forgotten about. It were a regular mirky night wi' clouds heavy above, an' Veyther said 'a could see the lights of Bristol a' glowen in sky low down as it med be a furnace, gurt ways off, an' a big smeech o' cloud hangen over 'en, as do when rain be gathering, an' the sight o' thiccy glow did make Veyther think on the gurt vire as

Parson do talk on, where the wicked go. It mid a been thic Methody chap he just a-heard did zet Veyther's thoughts like that, but he were a wonderful religious man, were Veyther, tho' 'piniated, an' did fetch all o' we hard over the head with gurt Book when us didn't versy right, Zundays. An' he were so sober a man as walked, and never a bit market-fresh. Well, there were Veyther wi' Hell-fire in's head which weren't a convanient thing to zet 'en home by of a dark night, but he would hev' knowed the way blind-mobbed, and so did old mare. Well, he were come so far's Five Gates, where old road do come out 'way past they Knaps like gurt emmetbuts where bones do lie buried, and 'ee do know 'tis tur'ble lonesome. Veyther he did zwer' around for to go down Hen Lane, an' 'tis so narrow's a want-wriggle, an' dark, one do seem buried like a carvy-zeed in a cake down there o' nights. So Veyther did cast a look over's shoulder to see there weren't nothin' behind 'en as shouldn't be there, for they lights in sky did zim to run in's head, and after he did turn away from they did seem like the darkness held 'en round so tight's a cheese-wring. 'Tes mirky there when do fall night. Sure enough he did see summat, an' that were a two-double pair o' lighteses behind 'en, as it mid be of a gentleman's carriage, tho' Veyther did know gentry don't often go by

there unless they'm miswent. An' 'tweren't old Squire neither for Veyther did know as he hed took sick an' wer' bad a-bed, and volk dedn' look to see 'en last the year out. An' it were the week before Christmas. Well, Veyther were frightened to see quality that way, but it ded'n scare 'en nowise, an' the lights were martal bright. But he did vind a quare thing, and that was, tho' night were so still 'ee could hev' heard a berry dapping in the hedge, yet a' couden' hear a pat o' the harses' hoofs, nor yet a sound o' wheels, and road be riddly down to they knaps. Well, a diden' think so much o' that, and old mare were getting on at a tidy pace, when something did make Veyther twirdle hisself round on seat to look behind, and there, if they lighteses hadn't turned into Hen Lane too an' were coming along fast behind 'en, an' now he did hear the harses' hoofs a' trampling fast and nigh to 'en. 'My dear life,' thinks Veyther, 'however shall we get'n passed.' For the lane be that strait two carts can't pass, nor yet hardly a rave-waggon get along. Now, Veyther haden' the bad manners to be keepin' back quality behind en', so he did fetch the old mare a whack, as weren't used to that from he, and her did fling up her heels and set off at a pace. An' Veyther look round again, and see they lighteses gettin' nearer and hear harses a tramplin' and gallopin' like the wind, so he

did whoop to they to keep back till could pass, but they didn' heed 'en and came on gallopin' like the wind. They did get so near, Veyther could see four harses an' a big coach, real magnifical, behind 'en, an' that scared 'en a bit for there weren't such in they parts. An' a' could see mimmickin' vellows in tight breeches an' high boots a' sittin' on harses' backs, an' the tails o' the leaders did swish across 'en an' 'pear to dout the flame for a two-three seconds, and then did glimmer out again a-swinging to the gallopin' of the harses. But the back-lamps of the carriage did shine steady like the flame of a gurt cat's eye in the dark. Veyther he dedn' like the 'pearance of'n, an', thinks he, they'll surely run we down, though the mare did vlee as if she had Old Vengeance at her tail. So Veyther did see they were nigh upon Summerlease by Wapsill's gate, where there'm a passing place and road be wide for maybe two acres and a ben. Now, they'll can pass, thinks Veyther, an' good riddance. So he did zwer' aside to let 'en pass. An' old mare wooden' stop, yet the pace they harses were a' gwain were nigh twice so fast as her. So Veyther couden' believe's eyes when did look back an' see coach weren't the leastest bit nigher, an' they harses a' gallopin' like the wind. So did try to pull up old mare, but she were ugly after the blow, an' wouden' bide still. Well, thinks Veyther,

at Forty Acre they'm bound to pass we, an' when they got past Bloody Paddock, where Forty Acre do lie after the garden spot, Veyther did put all his heft on reins and pulled old mare on to grass wi' her nose over gate, so's her couden' get no farther, bein' too witty a beast to try an' climb. An' there her stood a' sweatin' and a' heustering while Veyther were glad to think they'm bound to pass now. He did look around, and they so close, could see the steam rise on harses' flanks and dim the light behind, and there were they unchristian lanterns o' the riding-boys a' dancing wi' the harses stride, an' the tails o' the leader a' douting them every minute, an' harses all the while a' gallopin' like the wind. They wer' so close as I be to you, or most near, an' 'ee do know, there'm a road do turn out by Bloody Paddock an' run along towards Tip. And 'tis hill-land there by, and all moory where water be ponded, and the road so rough wi' all the ravvle o' the quar'. An' top of 'en, the tip o' redding stuff do stand nigh to little wood that Parson do say be part of old road of ancient days. Now just when Veyther did think they would be past 'en, come the moon a' ridin' out from behind a cloud, and did shine sudden so bright as had been high-by-day, and he did look round for the coach, and would you believe 'en, thic coach dedn' niver pass Veyther, for while he did look around the four harses did zwer', an' dash down by thic little

narrow old way like a rabbit down a wriggle an' —'Massy a' me,' think Veyther, 'sure they'm zogged an' stooded,' for he couldn' hear the tramplin' nor the wheels a' rolling no more. He stood there up in cart, did say, as he med hev' been a pillar o' salt, wi's head twirdled round over's shoulder, an' mouth open so wide's a bat could hev' flown in at 'en. At last he did think to pull mare's head round an' set her home again, and her by now so quiet's a christened babby. So he turned about, and when did look up towards top (the moon were gone in by then) there were lights a' flashing far off to other end of the lane nigh to Manor House, and they were going slow and stiff towards Tip, and there'm a gate by there, thou knows, do lead up to Tip, but 'tis always barred when miners be gone home. But Veyther could see from below, coach did dash through gate place just so fast as had galloped down road, an' they queer lanterns a' jumping and swinging, and the leaders tails a' swishing across them. They did head straight for the wood, a' gallopin' like the wind, an' when they reached the lew place, that were' the last Veyther saw o' the lights, for they went out, a' said, in the night like a candle flame a' blown out, an' the dark did shut down over 'en like a sack over a live coal.

"Veyther, he did stand in a maze, an' the old mare too, when sudden he did hear steps, and there were a man coming in front of 'en, after

the hedge, an' going fast, tho' as if he were a bit catching. When did get near, Veyther see it were P'liceman Pascoe, an' him a' pankin' like a ewe in a thunderstorm—he were a stout man—an' his face so white's milk, as Veyther could see by's one lamp. 'Where be gwain, Pleeceman,' Veyther axed of 'en, but Pleeceman didn' answer, and Veyther were scared to see 'en, knowing 'en to be so valiant a man as walked, though not too well liked on account of his never drinkin' wi' nobody. But he'd fear no man's face nor yet not a company. Well, Pleeceman Pascoe did grip old mare's bit as if he were glad of the feel of her, and pank—he were a stout man—so Veyther did ax of 'en after a bit would he get up an' hev' a lift. Pleeceman did get up beside Veyther and sit there an hicker as if he were cold. And when they did get whoam to house, Pleeceman purled on's feet as did get down, and Veyther axed of 'en to come in an' sit down, 'for I'm feared,' says he, 'you've had a turn.' Wi' that Pleeceman turn to Veyther, and a' says,—'Mr Dyer,' he says, 'you know I be a sober man.' 'Why, for sure,' says Veyther, 'an' some don't like 'ee the better for it,' he says, meanin' to comfort 'en like. 'Well,' says Pleeceman, looking a bit pearter, 'I'll tell 'ee what come to I this night, an' the first night ever I didn' knaw if the world were real about me.'

"'It were up to Manor House,' he said, 'to end of Long Walk, where wall be almost ruinous, and

there'm a little thatchen summer-house like a hay-pook in the moor of a gurt beech. Well, Squire's gardiner did 'quaint I last night as some shark had been round to poultry yard and had boned seven pullets, and 'tweren't a fox for was footmarks. So I think—here'm a rare place to climb in by—for 'ee know, old Squire be such a hunks he woulden' niver mend's fences.' Well, end o' it were Policeman Pascoe did clamber through fence, careful like—he were a stout man—and did peek wi's lantern inside summer-house to see if were anyone there. An' just then what do a' hear but steps' a' coming along Long Walk, gurt ways off, near to house. So Pleeceman, he thinks, 'I'll catch the villain,' a' says, an' did step inside summer-house so slick's a weasel an' did quat down amid scroff and twigs within. There were a gurt brack where haps were off door, and a' could look drough, and all were so still, a' could hear a bird peat in the rexen. The steps did keep a' comin' nigher so slow he could tell 'en one by one, and, thinks he, 'a'll soon be nigh.' Then moon did come out sudden and so bright as 'twere high-by-day, and Pleeceman could count every mop o' grass on path, and, thinks he, ''tis lucky I did get inside while 'twere dark, an' the villain cann't hike off now nowise.' An' still the steps kept coming nigher. An' just when they did turn corner there were Pleeceman feeling so sprack's a cat over a mouse, biding still wi's eye

at the brack. An' steps come louder, and slower, an' yet slower, an' did go, slow, right a' past the door of the summer-house all in the moonlight, an' there were Pascoe a' lookin' right upon 'en as did pass by an'—eh, my dear life, there were nothing there and nobody at all in sight, and yet they footsteps did stop, and pass on, an' go away in the moonlight, though there weren't nobody there, says Pleeceman, his voice going up in a sob like a sick child's.

"Veyther said a' did feel the flesh fair creep upon's bones when did look to Pascoe's face an see it all wet wi' the terror of what he hadn' seen, an' just then they did hear harses' feet come clatterin' up to the house in the night. An 'twer' the gardener from the Manor to say how old Squire had died in a fit a sitting in's great chair an' looking so grim as he did when did turn his son out o' doors, and would Veyther ride wi' 'en for doctor, for he were feared to go alone in the dark. So they all dree did go, for none o' 'en woulden' be left alone wi' the terror o' what he'd seen in's head. An' it were the week before Christmas, an' there were still thiccy glow in the sky did make Veyther think all the while o' the gurt flame where the wicked do go."

Granfer stooped to relight his pipe and looked across at John on his couch rolling sightless eyes at him in the darkness, "'Tis a wholesome thought for the most of us," said John.

THE WEATHER-GLASS

THERE had been Pophams at the shop since beyond the memory of man. Five generations of them had kept the post office ever since there was a post office in Wansdyke, and not even the oldest inhabitant could remember its coming. Tradition held that there had been Pophams in that crooked house ever since it was first built, crookedly, in the crooked main street of Wansdyke, where most of the houses are so crooked that you wonder how the inmates of them ever contrive to grow up straight. And Popham was a name of note in the place; one Popham was churchwarden in the reign of George III., and his name was immortalised in the church porch along with names of other parishioners who had been instrumental in the repairing of the great church after it was nearly destroyed by fire. The church, in its present state, after its reparation by Samuel Popham and others, was a barn-like, pillarless structure, with a splendid tower, which the fire had spared. Inside it had high pews of the "horse-box" order, and plaster cherubs on the walls and roof, which all bore a striking personal resemblance to His defunct Majesty, King George

III. And the village was very proud of them. Pophams had been knights of the Shire once, but the present family did not know that. Another Popham had been Ableman of the parish in Elizabeth's reign, and had carried his pike in the county musters before the Armada sailed, and the Pophams were big men still, though pikes were out of fashion at the Battle of Waterloo in which another bygone Popham had taken part. A pair of glasses stood on Miss Popham's "clavy-board," with his initials and the year of the battle cut in them. And there were housekeeping books in the cupboard which went back three hundred years, and were only kept because they had already been there so long, for who would care to look at such queer crabbed old things, especially when prices had all changed. But the most important, and not the least traditional feature of the Popham establishment was the weather-glass which stood in the middle of the parlour window—the crookedest window of all, which jutted out edgeways on the street and looked down it towards the church and the watercress bed, and the bridge beside the cross-roads.

The weather-glass was of a pattern familiar in Somerset villages. It was a small long-necked bottle turned upside down into a big wide-necked bottle filled with water, which rose and fell in the neck of the first bottle in accordance with variations of atmosphere. It is a standard pattern

and highly esteemed, but this was the most estimable weather-glass in the neighbourhood, by common consent. It was much more reliable than the weather-chart in the local paper which arrived once a week at the public-house—a double number containing household recipes and notes on livestock as well as the week's news. But then the paper only came on Saturday afternoons, by which time all the weather that mattered had already happened, since Wednesday was market-day, so where were you the wiser? Whereas Miss Popham's weather-glass stated the prospects every morning with regularity and conviction. Whether it was the situation of the parlour window or whether it was the reliable quality of the Popham properties generally, at any rate the reputation of that weather-glass was such that Farmer Dyer to Stoke made a point of driving round by the bridge (which was out of his way) in "catchly" weather to see what opinion Miss Popham's weather-glass held with regard to clearing up. Existing institutions in Wansdyke are respected because they exist, things move deliberately and nobody hustles. So Miss Popham and the weather-glass and the village generally pursued the even tenor of their way in mutual reliance and security. For Miss Popham was as much esteemed as her weather-glass, being of an equally reliable and long-established pattern. Some few indeed said she was "high-minded,"

and criticised the quality of the boot-laces and marmalade which formed the nucleus of a small shop supplementary to the post office of which she was mistress. But if she did wear her silk mantle with an air, she was a good friend to everyone who was in sickness or trouble, and indeed it needed someone of position to supervise the affairs of a village as village affairs must be supervised in a country post office. Miss Popham kept guard over the correspondence of everyone in the village. She wrote letters for the old folk who had daughters in service or sons in the colonies; she read the letters of the boys and girls aloud to the old people; she gave advice about any complication of correspondence or advertisement or any subject requiring an expert opinion. She refused indeed to keep a savings bank, partly because she considered it unsafe for a lone woman, and partly because there was one two miles away, at Upton telegraph office, where the postmaster was a friend, and told her of all the investments made in his office by her clients. She had even written letters for sweethearts too shy or too unskilful to write themselves. But as a rule few letters of this kind passed between Wansdyke sweethearts, since nobody there would ever think of getting anything but a local one, so that there was no need to write. And Miss Popham superintended the epistolary affairs of the village, to everybody's satisfaction, until one

day a new family came to the Manor House, and at the first appearance of one of the household in the post office with a parcel for some unknown and highly inconvenient foreign mail, Miss Popham apprehended worry and the undermining of her position as autocrat of the post office. Her anticipations were realised only too completely, for the places those people wrote to, and the things they sent, and received, by post, and the amount of information they required of her with regard to prices and postages to places she had never heard of: and then they were unsatisfied when, after searching a bewildering official guide unprofitably for a long time, she said, "Well, just put on so much as you're accustomed to put on, and I daresay 'twill get there." The worry of it began to turn her grey hair greyer still, and to make things worse she heard that they had gone about openly complaining of the local post-office habits — a thing calculated to shake her prestige in the village. And not only that but they complained of the price and quality of the things sold in her "general provision store," and were disposed to be captious when on sending for oatmeal they were offered cornflour, or were invited to pay a halfpenny a pound more for sugar than the shops in the big town—six miles away—usually charged. Nor was it only of Miss Popham that they complained, but they expressed dissatisfaction with many local institu-

tions, including the butcher, who belonged to an outlying hamlet, and had so many geographical and other difficulties to cope with in executing his orders that none of his other clients was ever unreasonable enough to complain too bitterly of delays and uncertainty. But the Manor family made an unprecedented fuss all because a leg of mutton had failed to arrive when it was promised, and the butcher explained that the sheep had run away (taking the leg with him) by way of excuse. Things were very bad. Miss Popham began to regard with misgivings the window filled with bottles of sweets and copy books and small rolls of flannelette, which was a gathering place for all the children of the neighbourhood, who were never tired of flattening their small noses against the pane to see if there was anything new in the box of penny toys and marbles behind the counter inside. Such criticism as this of the Manor family was calculated to discourage local custom at her shop, since grumbling has a much speedier influence than praise. And then a dreadful rumour began to be whispered that they actually wanted a telegraph office in the village, as if the neighbouring one two miles away could not serve them well enough!

It was Annie who brought the news, coming in one morning in a fluster of indignation and sympathy such as "Aunt" had not seen her in for long enough, because there had been a stiff-

ness between her and her stepsister's daughter ever since Ben went away, before the war, and did not come back again. Ben was Miss Popham's orphan nephew who had lived with her since he was nine, and was adored and spoiled by his spinster aunt in spite—or possibly because—of his outrageous audacity and "mischiefulness," which kept the village in a continual state of anxious speculation as to what Ben Popham would do next to himself or to somebody else. But probably through the intervention of some special Providence, Ben always managed to avoid very serious consequences, for even when he crowned a twelve years' career of experiment by climbing up the great waterpipe that was just being laid across country and achieved a twenty-foot tumble from the top of it, pitching on his head in the road below, still even then he seemed none the worse. He was carried off, battered and dusty, to doctor, who, knowing the quality of Wansdyke heads, only remarked, "Safest place he could have fallen on," clapped a plaster on the place and dismissed the offender with a caution. Some time after Ben diverted himself and his experimental habits into the useful channel of Her Majesty's Navy, and then he only came back for short visits to his aunt. But Ben and Annie had always been the firmest of friends. Annie was Ben's age, and a reponsible person, being the eldest of five children belonging to Miss Popham's

stepsister. Their father had died years ago, to everybody's great relief, for he had ill-treated his wife and squandered her little property, and then left her almost penniless with a young family, which she supported by dressmaking. She had been a lady's-maid before her marriage and might, as she had often been told, have made herself a good position by starting in youth as a town dressmaker. "But it weren't to be," as she often said to her stepsister, condoling with her on her fallen fortunes. "And then, if I'd hev' gone to London, I mid never hev' had a husband." The patriarchal theory of woman's place is firmly established in Somerset life, and Mrs Weaver spoke of her departed spouse as if he had been a model of all the virtues. Miss Popham sometimes felt that, benefactress and adviser as she was, not only to her stepsister but to many others, still the estate of spinsterhood was inadequate in some essentials. She had felt this more keenly than ever since Ben had not been home for three years. A house without any sort of a man in it seemed somehow so very much less than a house should be, and now that tribulation was likely to come into that house Miss Popham felt the innate defencelessness of her position more keenly than ever. Poor as it was, her stepsister's lot seemed at that moment to be more enviable than Miss Popham's own, for after all she had a husband though he was dead. She stepped across the

road to talk it over with her stepsister, who was all sympathy as Annie was all indignation at the rumour. For she had even heard that the Manor family proposed getting some stranger out from the big town who would "wake the place up a little," as they said. The threat of an earthquake could not have been more startling. No stranger is recommended in Wansdyke by the fact of his strangeness; it is bad enough to belong to folk no one knows anything about, but for a stranger to come and oust an old inhabitant—and an inhabitant as deep-rooted as a Popham—the idea was unthinkable. But it began to fasten itself on Miss Popham with a horrible insistency, and when she looked back across the road from her stepsister's small cottage, one of three belonging, like the post office house itself, to the postmistress, it came upon her with a dreadful shock that the next stage in the tragedy would be that she, Miss Popham, the mistress of the post-office and the descendant of four bygone postmasters, would be obliged to leave the crooked house with the weather-glass in the parlour window and remove herself and it to one of the small insignificant cottages over the way. Unless indeed she could bear to see her forefathers' barometer left in possession of strangers aud usurpers, for, without the small but regular income derived from her post-office work, Miss Popham's revenues would be nothing but the rent of those three cottages

and her father's old post-office house. It was a terrible reflection. She saw herself in a moment of dreadful vision, a lonely old maid, without prestige, influence or authority, without the means of giving the help she dearly loved giving—without interest, without resource, without her own familiar surroundings and appurtenances—without even a man in the house. This last reflection was embittered by the memory that always lay at the back of Miss Popham's mind, though she never discussed it with anyone. This was the remembrance of a certain passage of arms with Annie on one occasion when, Ben being home on leave, she had been escorted to a village dance by Jem Roberts (also a cousin), and a generally popular character among the village maidens. Ben (for the first time in his life) had sulked, and though Miss Popham never knew the exact nature of the interview between Annie and him, since they took great care that she should not be present, she had tried, in the capacity of devoted aunt, to help her nephew's cause by reading Annie a lecture which had been received with resentment and defiance by that usually gentle damsel. Ben's leave expired shortly after, and a letter was believed to have come to Annie from him by means of a brother next to Annie in age, but nobody, not even Mrs Weaver, knew what was inside it. Conclusions were drawn from the fact that Ben's leave was never spent at home

after that. There was always some urgent reason for spending it elsewhere; until at last they heard that his ship was on the way to South Africa, "where the war be." Miss Popham, though anxiously deploring the danger to her favourite nephew, said nothing about reasons for his not coming back, and Annie said nothing and Albert Edward (commonly called Tom), her next brother and Ben's special admirer, said nothing either, which was the less remarkable as he was a silent tow-headed youth, addicted to taking drinks of other people's medicine and keeping his own counsel. For all that, Albert Edward was supposed by the world at large to know more than the world knew about Ben's affairs. Albert Edward was medicine-fetcher in chief to the village, for Doctor lived four miles away and the outlying surgery was two, and the fee for fetching bottles was twopence apiece (with reduction for quantities) and a drink out of the bottle immediately on receipt by its lawful owner, a singular taste which laid its possessor open to an easy form of bribery. Albert Edward, it was said, had been offered a whole half of Mrs Sarah Virgo's last bottle but one she had for her attacks if he would only tell her what Ben Popham did say to their Annie last Michaelmas was year. But Albert Edward was staunch, and after emptying the neck of the bottle—his regular perquisite—he refused resolutely either to reduce it by

another drop or to allow that he knew anything whatever of the subject under disscussion. Nor had Miss Popham herself, who knew the depths of dissimulation that may underlie the most guileless of mahogany brown faces and round tow heads, ever tried, after one futile effort, to wrest the secret from him. And Jem Roberts had married somebody else last year. Wherefore looking now at Albert Edward, stolid as ever, and Annie, kinder and more friendly than she had been for a long while past, Miss Popham felt her old misgivings become certainty, and knew now that she had been "only an old fool for her meddling."

She went back home with a dejected step, and looking at the weather-glass as she went in, thought mournfully how soon it might be in new hands—those anonymous, revolutionary hands that were to make Wansdyke "wake up"—or else gone for ever from the place it had occupied during the passing of who knew how many generations. Here a shocking idea seized on her: the revolutionary might even put up a brannew barometer such as they had in the new shop to Combe which everybody said was living on credit and could never pay. She hurried indoors to get away from the idea. Annie and Albert Edward were to go into the town the next day by the carrier's cart that passed through twice a week. They were to bring her out provisions for

the shop. Should she be there long enough to sell them? Poor Miss Popham slept little that night.

Parson looked in the next morning to break the news to her that was no news now. It was too true, the Manor family found a telegraph office indispensable and had written to the town demanding new arrangements. Wires were to be laid and an office opened. Had Miss Popham nobody she could get to do the telegraphing work for her? No, the postmistress tearfully allowed that there was no one now; she could not do it herself, and would have to give way to a new-comer. "Ah well, well, at any rate they've not stuck up the poles yet," said Parson cheerfully, and trotted off leaving Miss Popham but little comforted.

Annie and her brother came back at night, the former brimful of the story which everyone was discussing in the carrier's cart, how a new man out Gloucestershire way—some kind of cousin to John Dyer's nephew's wife had applied for the position of post and telegraph-master at Wansdyke—when there wasn't even a telegraph pole yet in the neighbourhood—and had said that he was going to make those clodhoppers sit up. This foretaste of the new-comer's effrontery scandalised everyone, and much commiseration was spent on the case of the present postmistress, so soon to be turned out by this arrogant usurper.

"But us can show he," said a wrathful sympathiser, "that us don't like nor can't suffer strangers in these parts"; and at this point the cart had stopped at Parsonage gate and a stranger had got down off the box-seat and turned in along Parson's drive. In the unsteady light of the waggon lamps Annie, with a country-woman's eye for strangers, had noticed an odd stiffness in his gait, which, the carrier explained, was caused by a wooden leg. This exciting incident caused a sensation in a place where everybody possessed legs of the usual kind, but the other passengers, craning their necks to get further sight of the stranger and his leg, were disappointed to see nothing but a beard and a hat-brim before he rounded the laurels out of sight. Albert Edward, who had got out simultaneously to leave a parcel at the kitchen door, had, with unusual lack of enterprise, failed to gather any further information concerning the stranger, much to Annie's disappointment. "For Tom could easy have asked 'en the time or anything," said she reproachfully. But the countenance of Albert Edward preserved its usual impassive stolidity. Annie was especially vexed, as she had made up her mind that the stranger could be no other than the new postmaster come to spy out the land, and she trusted that the remarks of his fellow-passengers had discouraged him. Miss Popham regretfully feared such a theory was too romantic for practical pur-

poses; Albert Edward, stolid and tow-headed, offered no theory at all.

After their departure Miss Popham sat for long wrapped in melancholy thought. At last, with a housewife's instinct, she determined on a visit of inspection round all the cupboards. It was late in the evening when she started upon that particular cupboard where the old household books were kept. Setting her candle on the floor she knelt down, rather stiffly, to take one out and see if they could really be worth keeping supposing she should have to leave her roomy house and be cooped up in a little cottage over the way. She opened at random and tried to decipher the crabbed writing. It seemed senseless, almost, the letters were so odd and all the figures written in Roman characters. She had been kneeling longer than she thought, with the candle on the floor, when glancing up at the window, dim in the gathering dusk, Miss Popham, with a start of alarm, became aware of a curious object in the window pane above the weather-glass and the geranium plants. Looking again, the object resolved itself into a human nose, a nose unauthorised on that window pane by all the laws of social right, and it was flattened against the glass until it had become unnaturally white and shapeless at the end. Miss Popham was startled; the nose was too high up for a child's and she was a lone woman, and other people were shut inside their own houses, out of

hearing. The nose suddenly vanished and there was a rattle at the "haps," and an unfamiliar step sounded on the stone floor, a curious and rather sinister step, long and short in succession. Miss Popham caught her breath in real alarm and was preparing to scream, when a stentorian voice said "Aunt," and somebody with a beard and a curious stiffness in his gait walked in and "took her round the middle" with the unceremoniousness of affection.

It was some time later that Miss Popham came down to earth again and discovered that the candle was guttering on the floor in a through draught, and that Ben, though appearing like an angel, was still a man, and consequently hungry. Drying her eyes and straightening her cap, she turned to assure herself again that it was really Ben before setting out to feed him. She then observed with horror that as he sat on the sofa one leg was properly plied into correct sitting position but the other stuck stiffly out in front of him with a knob at the end of it in place of a boot. "Ess," said Ben with a stolid air, relapsing into the broad Somerset of familiar speech, "he went, he did, long o' they gurt gunses. And law bless thee, a cork leg do serve most so well's the old 'en, and don't bring so much dirt about th' house, nayther." The story of the leg was a very long one, and that of Ben's return home longer still, but the up-

shot was that Ben, hearing in town of the new office projected, had written to Parson to make inquiries, but had heard all about it in the carrier's waggon before he arrived. His identity was nearly betrayed by the ubiquitousness of Albert Edward (otherwise Tom), who had hurried out of the cart and arranged himself with care so that the cork leg tripped on him, and Albert Edward saw the owner's face. A brief colloquy, reinforced by a bribe, had cleared Ben's mind of various doubts and established Albert Edward in the fell career of deceit, which he had been pursuing during the past three days, and which, as he owned later, caused him to find considerable difficulty in "keeping his face modest" while his sister and Miss Popham were hazarding romantic speculations as to the stranger's identity. "A witty lad be Tom," said Ben, with a chuckle, but Miss Popham replied with some sharpness that he was a gallus like all the rest. And Parson too was in the plot, and Ben had stumped back that night all the way to town with recommendations in his pocket to various persons in authority known to Parson, and it now seemed pretty certain that Ben, and not the anonymous revolutionary, would become master of Wansdyke Post and Telegraph Office. "But thou, sure thou cassn't work a telegraph," said his astonished aunt. "Ess, sure, picked

up *that* in Africkey," answered Ben in an off-hand manner, and with a fine assumption of carelessness. It transpired that on the suggestion of the surgeon Ben had studied the subject during convalescence, and had had experience in a temporary post in Capetown while he was waiting to be shipped home. "An' the weather-glass shall bide, so he shall," said Ben, gazing affectionately at the two bottles which had been the symbol of so many of the hopes and fears that his aunt had been confessing to him. "Nor never no strangers shan't come into no Popham's post office, 'cept it be this chap," with an affectionate rap of his pipe upon his cork leg.

"Another one that's no stranger mid come into it tho'," said his aunt with a sidelong glance at the uncurtained window, through which could be seen a twinkling light from another window over the way; "an' then there'd be no room for a useless old woman like me." Ben slid a reproachful arm around his aunt and removed his pipe to state in a brief and forcible manner that while he'd a house there'd be half of it for her that reared him when he was a gallus of a boy, no matter who should come to bide in the other half. "Tho' happen she'll not come," he added, and quite suddenly lost the breezy confidence with which he had just been discussing plans and

possibilities for the future. His aunt looked at his downcast face in silence with a gleam in her eyes. By and by he looked up, eager, with a new idea. "Aunt," he said, heedless of the gleam in the excitement of a new hope, "thou did used to be mortal clever at writing o' letters, an 'splaining things to folk that didn' know how to make them out for themselves. Do 'ee think 'ee couldn't tell Annie something? There'm things it be mortal hard to know how to tell them, couldn' 'ee tell her, A'nt dear?" He had fallen into the coaxing tone that Miss Popham well remembered when in his early days he particularly wanted something she particularly meant he should not have. She gave way in those days, as a rule, as Ben knew well. But experience had taught Miss Popham more than one lesson since those days of Ben's childhood, and her confidence in the soundness of her own management had been shaken. Ben came a little closer, and his coaxing voice became more coaxing still. "Couldn' 'ee tell her, A'nt?" he insisted. Miss Popham took his pipe away very gently and knocked the ashes out of it neatly into the fireplace.

"Tell her thyself, thou foolish lad," said the old maid.

THE CHANGELING

She came down from the hills in the sweep's cart, and though the sweep himself was certainly odd enough to be the associate of any of the queer uncanny things that still linger on in Mendip, yet the elf-child in his cart was odder than he. She was sitting a'top of a pile of brooms, sacks, and brushes, as black as her own eyes and hair. She was wrapped in a cloak adorned with tufts and shreds of fur that might have once belonged to some antediluvian black cat, and she wore a black bonnet set well back on her head. Her face was black, and so were her legs where they showed through stockings which were chiefly hole, and her eyes were as black and brilliant as jewels of the nether world, and glinted with an elusive elfin mockery. She might have been seven, but her eyes held the malice of seven centuries, as if she had come suddenly out of elf-land, where Time is not, into our limited world of brief spaces and dull perceptions. You could have believed her a goblin set free by some miner's pick out of a shining black seam that had once been green and living and tropical, long ages before.

The old sweep, leading the old pony carefully

down the steep cobbled street, past the shop and the weather-glass, was espied by Mrs Hawke, standing over a pan of boiling cabbage which she was stirring vigorously with a great spoon. Her left arm supported a baby, which to anyone unacquainted with Wansdyke mothers would have seemed in imminent peril of diving head first into the big pan and getting itself cooked along with the cabbages. But Mrs Hawke had reared fifteen of her own, and was in no danger of mislaying babies. This child was none of hers, however, but a motherless thing whose father was in hospital, and Mrs Hawke, who always had room for a baby since her last went to service, had taken in the sickly waif till a home should be found for it. She called to the sweep through the open door, "What be thiccy thing 'ee've a' gotten, Mr Hall, and where be gwain, however."

Old Jack propped the pony carefully with a half-brick at the cart wheel, lest pony and cart should slide bodily down the slope, and explained that he was then on his way to the Manor, where he was already overdue, after his usual habit. "Truly," said Mrs Hawke, "and they a' lookin' for 'ee this dree days a' gone, carpets up and all, an' the servants in a caddle, and housekeeper a rampagin' mad." Old Jack's gentle and rather vacant face suddenly became illuminated through the soot with a smile of extraordinary charm. He explained that he had promised his services

simultaneously to four equally urgent cases, and that doubts as to whom to begin with had been settled by one resolute client, who came and fetched him and the brushes bodily in a spring cart. Old Jack owed his popularity partly to the lowness of his terms—"He do charge that liberal 'tis frowtening," said one householder—and partly to his extreme neatness of execution. He swept chimneys cleaner, and made less dirt in the rooms than any other sweep in the neighbourhood; in fact, the housekeeper at the Manor declared that he polished the flues, where space permitted, with his own person, as a finish to the brushwork. And probably his inability to say no to anybody was only the complement of the amiable disposition that made his sooty smile so attractive, as he swept his black forehead with a blacker brush, by way of salute, when admonished by those in authority. Nobody knew much about Old Jack's history and antecedents, because he had been Old Jack since beyond the memory of the existing generation. There was a vague tradition of a gipsy wife, who had died years and years ago, but nowadays Old Jack led a nomad existence for the most part, wandering from village to village and staying for days together in places where his work took him.

"There'm a many chimblies do want sweepin' hereabout," said Mrs Hawke, "An' my sister-law, sin' her man be buried, her don't sweep 'em wi'

the holly bush no mwore. Reckon her'd be glad if 'ee did do 'em for her. An' the little maid can bide along of I till 'ee've a'done," concluded the diplomatist, who saw a means of befriending the child, and securing a hostage at the same time.

Old Jack lifted the child down, explaining that she was his grand-daughter, and he had brought her because there was nobody at home to tend her. Then he put her in a corner of the settle and removed the half-brick, after which cart and pony continued their interrupted progress of slip and slide down the street until they were out of sight.

Mrs Hawke, left alone with the elf from the hills, considered her in silence for a moment while she put the baby in a box. "Take thy cloak off, my dear, and warm thy little hands," she said, and stooped to loosen the fastenings of the strange garment. The elf slid along the seat into the far corner, with a furtive movement like a mistrustful kitten ; she held her chin down, and looked up under black brows, arched into a delicate pointed line that almost met her hair. Mrs Hawke took hold of the fastenings at her throat, and the child bit suddenly, like a kitten, with small sharp teeth. Mrs Hawke pulled away her hand with a cry. "Well, mebbe her'm feared," she said on reflection, and looked round for something definite to soothe her visitor's fears. There was a big

apple on the shelf which she took and held towards the child, keeping her hand at a cautious distance from the sharp little teeth. This time, however, the visitor kept her head back and her eyes on Mrs Hawke's face, looking out of them with elfin malice. She put out a small hand, but instead of taking the fruit she reached quickly round and scratched Mrs Hawke's hand, leaving five red lines across the back of it. Mrs Hawke, angry at last, put the apple down on the settle and looked at the marks. The elf from the hills pounced on the fruit and flung it across the kitchen floor, laughing aloud in a shrill tinkle. It was the first sound she had made, and it seemed scarcely human. It decided Mrs Hawke's line of action, however. She sat down and took the child's two hands in one of her own, and looked at it with a grave face. "Thou'rt a naughty maid, and if thou don't behave like a little Christian I'll smack thee, so I will," said she in her mild voice, but it seemed to impress the elf, for she did not offer to bite or scratch again. Mrs Hawke removed the cloak this time without scathe. She brought milk, and bread and jam, and made the elf-thing eat, rebuking her when she tried to snatch again with the furtive kitten-like movement, and bade her take her food like a Christian maid. After that the visitor began to talk. She said she had another bonnet, that she loved grandaddy "all round his neck," and didn't want

anybody else, that she went to school sometimes, and scratched the other children when she could reach them. Interrogated as to whether she said her prayers, the elf was silent and crooked her eyebrows. She said her name was Jacintha, which Mrs Hawke privately thought a heathenish kind of name. After that, she offered no resistance while Mrs Hawke washed her face and hands, and went away with grandaddy when he returned, with a slightly chastened air. "I'll come back to bide along o' you, I will," she said, looking back over her shoulder as the sweep's cart shuffled off past the watercress bed and the valley winding towards the distant hills.

Old Jack was seen no more for many months, and meanwhile the baby went back to its relatives, and left Mrs Hawke rather forlorn. And though her husband secretly marvelled how his wife could "feel the miss" of someone else's baby so much, having had fifteen of her own, he offered no criticisms. One wet afternoon as she stood at her door about the close of school hours, looking mechanically down the road to school, as she had looked most days of the year during the childhood of her own brood, Mrs Hawke saw the sweep's cart coming along past the watercress bed. There was something unfamiliar about the well-known object, and as it drew nearer through the mist, she realised that a new sweep and a new pony were attached to the old cart, and while she was

wondering if anything could have happened to Old Jack, a small damp figure cast itself precipitately out of the cart and came running to her with arms spread wide. It was the elf-child from the hills, but a woeful elf this time, red-eyed and incoherent, clasping Mrs Hawke's motherly skirts like a despairing refugee in a strange land. She was inarticulate with sobs, and the sweep explained to the mystified object of her appeals. Old Jack had "gone off sudden with the pew-mony," and the waif was desolate, because the family she had lived with had left the neighbourhood, and there was no one to take the child but a "Big-aunt," who was herself on the parish, and did not want her, and unless somebody would take her in she must go to the workhouse. So the new possessor of Old Jack's brooms and cart (for the old pony had died too), moved by the waif's appeals, had offered to bring her down to see if the friend whom she had always kept in remembrance could offer any solution to the problem. The child wept, red-eyed, and clung tight to Mrs Hawke's knees, who looked down at her with concern on her motherly face. "'Tis pity there'm no sort of kin to take the little maid," she said. "Poor lamb," and the elf clutched her tighter. "I want to come and bide along o' you," she said suddenly and with great distinctness. "Do 'ee let I bide along o' you." "Dear life, I cassn't do that," said Mrs Hawke, much startled, but the elf-child

would not be convinced. Her lamentations were so persistent that it was finally decided she should stay for a few days until her parish guardians decided on her fate. So she came, and Parson was appealed to for advice, being a knowledgeable gentleman and high-learnt. Parson interviewed the guardians on the subject, who considered the matter, and offered the munificent sum of 2s. 6d. weekly to Mrs Hawke if she would adopt the waif. Hawke, with Somerset caution, was for avoiding unknown responsibilities, especially in connection with things impersonal and presumably malevolent like Boards. "And Inspectorses a-coming, and never you don't know what such as they won't do to 'ee," said he; but Mrs Hawke took an unwonted line of resistance, whereupon "measter," finding her set on taking the child, wisely gave up the point, and resolved to shift such responsibility as he could upon Parson who seemed in no wise afraid of it. So Jacintha came into christened land to bide among friendly human people, and as a token that elf-land was to be left behind Mrs Hawke immediately named her Jane.

The elf-child accepted the change without a murmur, as she accepted the accompanying transformation of soap, combs, clean pinafores, grace before meat, and other drawbacks of civilisation. But all the soap and pinafores in the world could not reduce the ex-Jacintha to the semblance of the native Wansdyke children,

fair and rosy and large-limbed, looking like a bed of gilly-flowers in the little school on catechism-and-clean-pinafore day. Nor was it only in externals that Jane was unreclaimed. A certain glint in her black eye came to be known before long as a danger signal, and the other children learned to fear the small fists which she used with extraordinary force and precision. It began when she caught Jeremiah Atwell, aged nine, in the act of slaying a nestful of young thrushes he had just pulled out of the churchyard hedge. Jane charged the astonished youth like a minute torpedo, hit him in the face with both fists, and then tore out a large quantity of hair. Jeremiah, intimidated by her warlike attitude, surrendered the one remaining nestling which Jane carried off, and after threatening dire vengeance on anyone who should do such a thing again, she searched about until she found a blackbird's nest with two babies in it. Here she put the young thrush, and the owners of the nest appeared somehow to grasp the situation, for they adopted the waif without protest, and fed it with their own nestlings till all three left the nest. But if her contemporaries had more fear than love for Jane, her teachers liked her both for her charm and for her extraordinary quickness of mind, which sometimes led to embarrassing results, notably on the occasion when Jane adapted the principles of a Sunday-

school instruction on the Force of Prayer to her own ends with a success which seemed to her instructress almost profane, for she prayed for a new hat and got it, announcing the fact to her teacher and the rest of the class with great solemnity. And for some unaccountable reason, Parson only chuckled when he heard of it. But Jane even as Jacintha had never had any fear of Parson, and attached herself to the tail of his "skirt-coat" with perfect assurance whenever she met him in the street.

In spite of her eccentricities the village gradually became used to the changeling; her foster parents were devoted to her, so that she seemed to have settled down into the existing order of things, and bid fair to go on being Jane to the end of her days, when suddenly the crash came. It came out of a baker's cart one morning in late spring, in the shape of Jacintha's "Big-aunt," who was five feet high, and looked less, because she was "plied near double" over a stick, and seemed to carry her nose and chin (which nearly met) a great deal further in front of her than most people do. She had piercing black eyes, rather like Jane's, when Jane was remembering Jacintha, and she wore long gold ear-rings that wagged and tinkled. She said she had come to see Jacintha, and Jacintha, on catching sight of her relative, fled for her life and hid in Farmer Pearce's mow-yard.

Mrs Hawke, good churchwoman as she was, was disturbed at the sight of her new visitor, whose appearance did indeed suggest something malign "grown into a hoop with age and envy." But Mrs Hawke knew quite well that "Christian volk had'n no right to be feared by any talk of witches and such," and since even then the guest might cast the evil eye on her or the child, she asked her to walk inside. Tribulation came in a few minutes. The Big-aunt had taken into her witch-like head that Jacintha might be useful to her now she was reformed and growing a "gurt maid," so she proposed that the child should come back with her, and light her fires, and clean her house, and save her the expense of help she was obliged to pay for. "An' the two and six will be a help to I, so it will," said she, "and we that be kin to her should have it first." Mrs Hawke quailed before that argument. Ingratitude and neglect from the kindred during all this time that she had helped and cared for the child did not seem to count as reasons for keeping Jane since obviously the law must be on the side of her kinsfolk. "Us'll ask the little maid hersen," said Mrs Hawke temporising, with despondency at her heart. After a long search Jane was produced and brought weeping to the house, where they stood her up, with difficulty, before the Big-aunt, who said, "Eh, sure, her'll be a handy maid to clean and keep

the house, and can go back along o' I when Carrier do pass to-night, and us'll see about the two an' six when we do get whoam again." "Wilt thou go with thy Aunt, Jane, my dear," asked Mrs Hawke with a grievous misgiving that she could no longer protect her foster-child. Jane stopped crying, and looked up: "I wunn't leave 'ee, I wunn't I wunn't," she cried, ending the last refusal in a scream, and stamping her small foot. "Thou'rt bound to come along when I do bid thee," said the Big-aunt with a menacing air, which her five hooped feet of stature made more disconcerting. Jane stood up straight and went to her knee. She looked up at her witch-like kinswoman with the old gleam in her black eyes. The original Jacintha was back again, stamping and crooking defiant talons. "I'll scratch 'ee," she said, "I'll bite thee, I'll worry thee, I'll put sticks in thy bed, I'll put water in thy fire, I'll put pins in thy chair, I'll—" Mrs Hawke, much scandalised, tried to stop her, but Jacintha went on regardless, with a string of imp-like threats, screaming in a shrill treble, and dancing like a thing possessed. The Big-aunt sat glowering at her great-niece from the depth of the chair, and said nothing, while her eyes glittered in the dusk of her bonnet like Grandmother Wolf's. Suddenly a shadow fell on the threshold, and Parson's large round spectacles appeared as he put his head inside and said, "Tut, tut, tut, tut, what's Jane doing now?"

Jacintha made a dash at Parson and clutched his coat-tail in a passionate grip as if it were a sanctuary-knocker; she said nothing now, but faced round at her unvenerable relative in the great chair, as though assured that the Law was now on her side. Mrs Hawke, weeping, began to explain the situation, while the enemy, motionless in the big chair, never took her glowering dark eyes off Parson and the elf at his coat-tail. "Yes, yes, of course. I see, I see," said Parson. "You want to take Jane home with you and adopt her, don't you? A very right and proper thing for her relations to do. And I am sure you must be very grateful to good Mrs Hawke for all the trouble and expense she has been put to with the poor little orphan, whose own relations wouldn't take her when she needed it." Parson's tone was as bland as his spectacles, and the Big-aunt yielded a little. "Dree shillin'," she muttered, "an' her a useful maid by this." "And a great deal more than half-a-crown's worth of trouble a child gives, eh, Mrs Hawke?" pursued Parson, blander than ever. "The food they eat and the clothes they spoil, and the shoes they wear out—oh, dear! oh, dear!" Mrs Hawke, still sobbing, removed her apron from one eye in astonishment at Parson's penetration. The pious diplomatist went on with an unruffled face: "And you can't keep the child from school to clean the house in these days, not with the committee's visitor by.

Ah, indeed, a great trouble and expense a child is—and a very charitable work to undertake. The guardians might allow you less, as you're her Aunt, but you'll be doing your duty, and that's a very comforting reflection. And the Inspector will complain if she's not well fed; they're very careful nowadays. And you sign papers, of course. You'll have to see the committee's visitor here, you know." He produced a notebook and pencil and drew a chair up to the table with one hand, because Jacintha had secured the fore-finger of the other in an appealing clutch. "Come now, what about the papers," said Parson, "you can't take the child back without them—she's in charge of the parish, you see?" But the Big-aunt knew nothing of papers, and said so, and said, moreover, some very rude things about "volks as meddled wi' other volkes kin when they did come to fetch 'em." So Parson explained again, and went on explaining at such a length that both Mrs Hawke and the visitor were "clane duttered," as Mrs Hawke said afterwards, and the upshot was that the Big-aunt got into her baker's cart and went back to the hills in a miff, by no means mollified by Parson's assurance that he would come and settle things with her parish authorities after their next Board Meeting. Come he did, and represented things to that body in such wise that they decided to reject the claim of Jacintha's Big-aunt, on the ground of

eminent unsuitability. Parson, going to announce the decision to the Big-aunt, found her bristling with offended dignity, and expressing herself thankful that she "needn't caddle wi' no ungrateful saucy maidens, for I've got a very nice Christian girl to come and bide along of I—being afflicted—and very clean about her cooking, not that her's over young, neyther, for her be thirty-nine." Spinisters of such age are usually described, in the discreet Somerset phrase, as "staid persons," and the staidness of the present one proved equal to the demands of Jacintha's Big-aunt, for it subsequently appeared that her "affliction" consisted in slight imbecility and total deafness, which enabled her to bear with fortitude the perpetual nagging of her companion.

So Parson returned home, having first administered a lecture on the sin of covetousness, which was not received with humility by the Big aunt. And finding the small niece secure in Mrs Hawke's care, considerably chastened and subdued, he took the opportunity of recommending meekness and submission to her also. It was an outwardly regenerate and decorous Jane who curtsied to Parson as her foster-mother bade her. But in the impenitent black eyes that glanced up at him, the old Jacintha was lurking still.

"If thou'lt wesh thine eyes wi' water vrom Pearce's Well, thou'lt vind no mwore o' thy pain. Vur he do rise toward the zun, look'm, an' 's waters be wonderful healin' accardin'." Now Pearce's Well is not far from Elwell, and that name carries the tradition of healing further back than the good people of Wansdyke can remember, because Elwell is said to mean Holy Well, so named in the days before the seen and unseen world were parted as widely as they are now. "The entrances of the elder world were wide and sure," and though the forefathers of this Somerset village did not know the length nor breadth of their earth, they were certain that it was enclosed all about by heaven, and so they called the healing waters of the old springs the Holy Well, and Wansdyke people still attach great virtue to their powers. Those were the days when the Mendip valleys were thick with forest, and the protection of saints was a thing valued by the early primitive peasantry, to whom the wild places were full of mystery, and all the solitudes peopled by ghostly presences, friend or fiend.

This mythical sense that personifies the unknown fathered the tales old people tell even now of ghosts and bogles. When it ceased to be a religion it became legend and fairy-tale; nowadays it lasts on in superstition. It is older than the Catholic Church, because it comes down from a time before Pan was dead, when the pagan sense of charm in Nature was a living instinct. It did not die out altogether before the new faith, but the old deities became suspect, and when their wells and woods were put under the protection of saints, according to the popular idea the old owners still lurked there in fiendish form, and not St Michael's self could rob the hills of their terrors. The mystery and charm of wild Nature had become a thing fearful and devilish, and a wayfarer now in the wild forest, catching an elusive vision of some fleeing Dryad as white as the sunlight on the beech-holes, had to sign himself for dread of some strange terror threatening from the depths of this unknown mighty power of Nature. When mythology grows old it becomes romance, and this beautiful West Country became the hunting-ground of romance in later days. Avalon and Camelot are both in this county of Somerset, and across the golden waters of the Channel rises the low blue line of the Welsh hills, with Cardiff hidden in a cloud of smoke at the water's edge. It was from those hills to the place where the tall chimneys now

stand up that Sir Geraint passed the Bridge of Dread. In the West you have always the sea or the hills on the horizon, and both have the same mysterious call. Somerset adventurers in the olden days went off on a splendid hazard to seek new lands or the world's end beyond the sunset. Their descendants in the village schools of to-day can rattle off the chief cities and the exports or imports of those same lands, but they run some risk of losing the saving sense of wonder that blessed the ignorance of their forefathers. Idealism slips all too easily out of a life of safe routine and practical effort; it may be questioned whether a known world is always as salutary a place to live in as one beset with imaginary terrors, as the world was in the age when Goblin Coombe got its name.

But the mythical sense of their forefathers clings still to the Mendip peasantry, for in many of the country villages the old prejudices have not been worn down by travel and education. In a village barely seven miles from a great city, many of the people have never been in a train. Few are "travellers"; there are neighbouring villages which some of them have not seen, and between many such places there is a strong hereditary instinct of jealousy. In remote parts people know the market road and the roads to the houses of their friends; but in many

cases these are the only roads they know. The world is not realised by these people, and it is small wonder that strange and lonely places are still to them beset by terrors of the unseen. So, though Pearce's Well has ceased to be regarded as having any supernatural agency, there are still ghosts and goblins thereabouts, and various people have "zeen zights" in certain parts, though it is hard to get any circumstantial account of the said sights. Some of the old people speak frankly of ghosts and fairies and the old tales, though "knowledgable" persons like schoolmasters and parsons take pains to discourage such beliefs. But the instinct persists, and many a dark lonely "drin" or "trap" is shunned at nightfall. Mendip people are chary of talking of their deepest-rooted superstitions; they are evasive when questioned about witchcraft and the evil eye, but have firm faith in both nevertheless, and stories can be rooted out which prove that the old dark ways of the world are still trodden. Planet-rulers are consulted by those who have been overlooked, and profess to show the victim the face of his illwiller in a glass of water. A Mendip schoolmaster was much shocked some time ago when a small boy told him that Satan could assume any form he pleased except a sheep's. It is only about fifty years since Mendip folk have been appreciably changed by education;

many of the old people yet can hardly read. People untravelled and unread for generations cannot fail to be tenacious of old prejudices. In Wansdyke there are two roads leading to the church; the directer one has been made of late years. And though this latter is in daily use, the Wansdyke people in their funeral processions always take the longer, steeper way by which their fathers were carried for the last journey of all when the other road was only a footpath by the brook. Tradition is a power in old-world places, even when it has lost the support of reason; the immemorial sense of mystery in Nature will crop up. It created the old worship, the traces of which remain in the great Druid circle. On the common above Wansdyke there are "fairy stones," queer shapeless masses full of holes. Nicholas Atwell used to dig them up and sell them at a high price in the intervals of being sent to jail for doing so. And there are many survivals of a life long passed by and forgotten in local place-names: Pagans Hill, for instance, above the valley where the stones lie; Fairy Toot, an ancient tumulus on the hillside looking towards the Channel—a profane farmer nearly destroyed this years ago, burning the stones for lime, and the buried bones, it is said, along with them. Then there is Goblin Coombe, a real bit of old Somerset, where any wayfaring knight or pilgrim might meet adven-

ture. There are "sights seen" here, though their nature remains vague. And if you want to get to Goblin Coombe, the best way is to go as far as the Highway-man's Oak and then lose yourself.

A by-road passes it, and it is approached by certain of the characteristic Somerset lanes that make believe to begin by accident and lead nowhere. If you stray into one of these lanes and follow its winding track for adventure's sake, you may quickly become perplexed among the changing hollows of the lower Mendips, for the roads wind so. That lane to Goblin Coombe, one June morning, promised to be unending, and nothing happened for all its turns and twists until suddenly a small boy-thing came walking round the next corner. He had very large ears like jug-handles, and an expressionless freckled face; and when he was asked where the the road led to he only smiled and would not answer. No blandishments could move him to utter a word; he smiled and kept his head down and went away. He might have been spellbound by some witch-stepmother for anything you could tell. Further on there was a man by the meadow gate; but when he was appealed to to solve the mystery of the winding road, he only shook his head and waved speechless signals with his hands, and after the first bewilderment it became clear that he was quite deaf, and was pointing at his

ears to show it. There was an ordinary man at some distance cutting grass all alone in a great meadow, and he said: Well, 'ee can vollow path drough Goblin Coombe, but 'tis wild-like. Else 'ee can cross vields to turnpike road." But we followed the path.

It is as lonely a place as you can see, a cheerful loneliness, barren and secure because the plough would be useless in Goblin Coombe. It is a long, winding, narrow cleft in the limestone; the steep sides are bare above, and dotted with dwarf-thorns twisted into queer shapes by the mighty sea wind that sweeps up from the Channel whose waters shimmer far away beyond the end of the valley. Shrubs and saplings grip on the shelving stony sides, and the grey boulders crop up among tufts of gorse and patches of herbage and clumps of ash and fir, and the whitebeam, whose downy leaves shine like silver in the spring before other trees are well in leaf. Up above where the tilled land meets the Goblin region there are gnarled hedgerow oaks that seem to "girn" and threaten like queer elf-things bound fast in the tree's slow growth. The barrenness is full of life, for it is so savage that all the wild things grow or run there at their will, except when the owners come, now and then, to shoot rabbits. At other times the Coombe belongs to Nature—or the goblins, which you will! And to confirm their right, in the middle of the

Coombe a gaunt grey signboard stands up declaring, in stark defiance of the evidence of your eyes, that there is "no path." Whence it is plain that the track winding down the valley is an illusion, a goblin path that leads you straight into fairyland.

The steep knolls with their fairy thorns end abruptly at the road that passes the end of the valley, and after you cross that you are in the borderland of goblindom, of which the extreme limit must be the little wood of fir-saplings that flanks two prim grey cottages obviously new and hopelessly unromantic. You could fancy that wood beneath the crescent of a young moon, alive with a silent stir of wee things, "green jacket, red cap, white owl's feather," peering across the neat stone wall with curious, sharp, elfin faces at the red firelight, streaming to meet the moonlight without. This is where the thistles grow, mighty thistles as high as your shoulder, twisted and sun-bleached and weather-beaten, stretching out their branches like candelabra of wrought-iron with magnficent spiked leaves. Masses of thistledown there are, clotted in tufts or blown along the hedge by eddying winds. This is the delight of goldfinches, and the grace of these exquisite creatures, as they wheel and flutter after the flying down, is a thing beautiful beyond words.

The dumb boy and the deaf man and the

lonely beauty of Goblin Coombe had an amazing propriety with the quality of the place. It may have been some such strange hazard chancing in early days that got the valley its elfin character. However, since ignorant terrors may foster dulness and cruelty, it is better, no doubt, that the children of to-day should not be beset by fears of the unseen as were their fore-fathers. But there is a worse thing than being ghost-ridden, and that is being ghost-bereft; and the children of to-day run some chance of being robbed of beliefs after they have been cured of superstitions. It will be a hard case if the poor, especially in towns, are to be bereft of all supernatural element in their daily life, for their children have often so little food for the imagination at home that their best interests lie in day-school teaching. And if a child's ignorant mind is to be rationalised and secularised out of faith and reverence, the most vivifying part of his life will become dwarfed. There is no crueller imprisonment than that which shuts up a growing mind within its five senses. The science which should deepen the sense of wonder in life is instilled in quantities too small to have a great influence on untrained minds, and if the wholesome sense of wonder which is the soul's life be denied to the board-school child of to-day, he will be in worse case than his pagan fathers, who, for all their ignorance and superstition, possessed a quickening sense of

mystery in the world by which, in a blind guess at the hidden wider life beneath, they could at least—

"Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea,
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn."

WELL-WATER

"Narcissus was a bachelor," says the Romaunt of the Rose, and it may here be observed that Bachelor has acquired a different meaning since the above statement was made.

> Narcissus was a bachelere
> That Love had caught in his daungere.

Narcissus looked into a well, and there he saw himself reflected. That is the beginning of all sorts of fairy tales, because the sense of double life that comes from reflections in clear water has a perennial fascination for children of all ages. The story of Narcissus, like all the best stories, draws its moral plainly; he fell in love with himself, and there was an end of him shortly.

> He lost his wit right in that place
> And died within a little space.

Nor was Narcissus the only young gentleman who has come to grief through too earnest contemplation of his own foolish self.

Reflections apart, well-water and clear springs possess an immemorial fascination for mankind, which Household Science and the Extension Lecturer can hardly dissipate. Wells are like

ballads, because they come up to the uses of daily life from unknown depths and forgotten sources, and all about them lie tracts of forgotten and unwritten history. There is probably nothing in literature older than the Song of the Well, when the adoration of desert-dwellers sprang out to the springing water before the times of Narcissus and the Naiads—"Spring up, O well, sing ye unto it!" The medieval idea of scenery was immensely influenced by Biblical models, the fascination of wells and of rivers of living water possesses the minds of early poets and artists always with a sub-consciousness of some remoter significance. Pure beauty shares equally with a half-melancholy allegorical sense in the lovely images of the secular poets:—

> Under a tree, beside a well, I saw
> Cupid our lord his arrows forge and file.

Water is almost the oldest of man's needs; half the superstitions we play with nowadays are connected with this mysterious element. The old ideas of our forefathers come down to us with the old words and the old ways, weighted with a burden of immeasurable antiquity. But they wear the garments of those they live amongst with so natural an air, like Narcissus beside the young knights-bachelors of the Rose-garden that only now and then do we realise with some-

thing of a shock the vast age hidden behind their unassuming habit.

When prehistoric man inhabited Mendip caves there was probably enough water for everybody within fighting distance of a neighbour because the population was scanty. It is not yet very dense, but people live nearer together and want water without fighting for it. There is enough in the low-lying valleys, but the hills are often capped with so deep a layer of limestone that getting water is a hard matter if you live on a hill. A great many West-countrymen have a curious gift, seemingly occult, by which they divine the presence not only of minerals but also of water springs beneath the earth, ever so far down indeed below the solid rock. Dowsing, as it is called, is quite a common gift among West-countrymen, they think little of having it; and since the practice lends itself with great ease to all sorts of humbug and trickery it has been seriously discredited in some quarters. On the other hand it has been viewed with the gravest suspicions by the highly respectable corporation of a West-country town, who not many years since refused to get a professional dowser to seek water in some municipal property on the plea that it was countenancing the Black Art.

A dowser came to Wansdyke the other day, because the people at the big house had grown tired of hauling water half a mile up hill for ever.

Water had been found on the same hill by neighbours who, sinking their well to the depth prescribed by the diviner, came upon a fine spring. They wanted to get more, but sinking deeper their spring ran away altogether. So the story of that well also had a moral to it, like Narcissus. The dowser came down in a dog-cart; he wore leggings and a great-coat and did not look as if he had anything occult in his composition. He cut a big V-shaped twig from the hedge and tramped briskly round the lawn holding the thing bent wide in his two hands. Presently it began to twist itself over and over, stopping now and then as he got away from a certain line known only to himself and the twig, then as he came back to the hidden course of the stream fifty yards down below the lime stone, the uncanny green fork kicked and twisted as if it were a live thing. It looked as easy as twirling a straw in your finger and thumb, and certainly nothing could be simpler than the twisting round of a supple green willow-fork, held taut and wide, well down and outwards with hands palm uppermost and thumb doubled over the fingers clear of the twig. The thing is so elastic that it quivers almost to a thought. But then it does not kick and spring up against the will of the hands gripping it, and by all appearance of its own accord, except when it is held by some one who has a mysterious affinity with the buried springs sliding far below

underground. The divining power can be transmitted; the dowser's fingers on your wrists will make the twig kick and bend to the water down below. But unless you want to be convinced you may even then remain sceptical, because the extended fork does seem so springy that a touch against anxious hands when the nerves are tense might set the quivering thing in motion. But then the water is there, exactly where the man tells you; he himself does not need the rod, except for exact location, he feels the influence rising by spreading both hands abroad as he walks; when there are springs below he feels the palms pricking. Any live branch, in a regular V-shape, serves for divining; a grass stalk, so it be even, or a dried and shrivelled piece of bent, kicks upward as nimbly as a green hazel bough in the right hands.

If you choose to disbelieve, you may; there are as many ways of explaining away this apparently natural magic as there are of explaining miracles, but so solid are the foundations of the magic that several famous West-country diviners have solidified themselves into a firm, and go far and wide to seek water, and find it too. They say they can undertake to teach anyone the gift in a few days, unless he actively sets himself against it. Some people are more apt to the dowsing than others, but the gift, they say, is latent in nearly everyone. It seems to be best

known in the West, this art of water-divining, a fact that is in favour of its genuineness; for occult gifts are seldom developed except where they are needed, like protective mimicry among animals. Somerset hilltops are dry places, very different from the Cumberland Fells where you can walk the whole of a lonely midsummer day bare-foot on the cropped turf, and pass through innumerable tiny rivulets hidden in the thick moss that defines their course. The need of water is very urgent in the West, and the prevalence of this "dowsing" gift amongst Somerset men looks like a provision of nature for her children. It is not wise to discredit the presence of electric currents in the days of telepathy and Marconigrams, although there is no law in this world to make anyone believe anything in it. Some people's moral constitutions seem incapable of assimilating anything but the compressed-tabloid form of spiritual nourishment which is called pure reason and which some of their neighbours find poor stuff to work on. The subject of occultism however is full of traps for the sentimental; it is not wise to walk through that labyrinth without a clue. The well of the Rose-garden had a crystal in its depths, which would show all the hidden corners of the garden "to him that in the water museth," yet Narcissus, looking in, only "loved his own shadow, so that at the last he starved for woe." Science does not remove the

fascination of well-water and of the things it covers or that cover it, of the long lily-stems swaying in the green depths of a lake, that hold the flower-cup fast to the hidden root far below, or the well-springs that feed the ineffectual slow course of rivers winding countless fathoms down at the sea-bottom. The proper self-respecting sentimentalist is not discomposed by being told that the blue of heaven is made up of particles of moisture and corruption, because it is your own fault if you are going to be "captived to the truth of a foolish world," and, after all, the blue remains. However carefully you may study the strata of any locality from the Ordnance map, pure reason does not locate the source of springs with the conviction of the twisting hazel-twig. So that, until science is prepared to be a little more dogmatic about certain hidden currents and magnetic affinities, a good many people will prefer to stand by the time-honoured ritual of the dowsing-rod.

A POET OF THE PEOPLE

THERE was a wagtail all alone on the edge of the pond in Parsonage Lane. He had invented a little game, and was very busy and perfectly happy all by himself. The game was a little dance, which he repeated continually just for the pleasure of doing it. He started with a short run along the edge, then a pirouette, coming down on both his tiny feet together, then a little dash into the water's edge, where he stopped, not attempting to catch insects, and appeared to admire himself for a few seconds before he returned to the bank, dipping his graceful tail up and down with the true wagtail elegance, and then he began it all over again *da capo.* It is not usual to find an artist among birds; at least one is accustomed to think that their lyrical gift cannot be art because it is nature; but there you might start a very long argument. At any rate, the wagtail went on with his game until the poetess of the village came out of her cottage just opposite, and he flew away.

Mr Whistler says that there never was an artistic nation; but there are people who mistrust that eminent artist's principles of criticism. It is

certainly true, however, that artists, savage or civilised, use their gift first of all for the sheer joy of it. The question of what the art is worth comes second, and involves all sorts of secondary considerations, and it is probably rare that the excellence of any work is proportionate to the maker's delight in making it. The divine instinct of making lies deep down in the heart of the artist, and between the islander's pleasure in his savage ornament and the new R.A.'s satisfaction in his diploma-work lies a very large tract of psychology. Mrs Tovey, like the wagtail, makes her poetry, because she likes to, with supreme indifference to the quality of the result.

As with all spontaneous art, the subjects of Mrs Tovey's poetry lie close at hand. In the Jubilee year she was inspired to poetic reflections on the reign, which, being humbly presented through the post, brought a gracious acknowledgment from the Queen that cast a reflected glory over the entire village. The style of the poem is simple.

> "For fifty years our gracious Queen
> Has worn a glorious crown,"

it begins, and the poetess goes on to the practical application—

> "Keeping a heavenly one in view
> Brings various blessings down."

The remaining verses expand these reflections in various ways. The war produced more effusions from the village Muse. It touched us near because several of our lads went through it, and more than one long composition came from Mrs Tovey's brain. The practical inconveniences of the war presented themselves forcibly to her mind in the reflection—

> "God in His mercy showed His love,
> Sent something good to eat;
> How very glad they all must be
> To get such sweet relief."

The appropriateness of the sentiment must be pleaded in extenuation of the inadequate rhyme. But it is domestic subjects that most often inspire Mrs Tovey, because the mother of many children cannot but have experienced some of life's deeps of joy and sorrow. Several of her children, whom she tenderly loved, died in youth, and, with the true maker's instinct, she made a song out of their memory. There was much to say about the elder boy "when at the age of fifteen years he left this world of ours" because he was not the pattern of robust scapegrace that rejoices the hearts and strains the patience of other village mothers. His money "was seldom spent on sweets or nuts or any useless thing," but devoted to loftier purposes. The details of his life were exemplary—

"He was a strong teetotaler,
Perhaps you might have heard,
And signed the pledge at eight years old
Without a murmuring word.

So regular at the Sabbath school
For many years he'd been,"—

goes on the bereaved mother, mourning in her quaint fashion over the memory of her son's virtues and his last illness. The true maker puts all his experience into his work, as the heart broods the hands make, so that grief, which leaves others dumb, makes the poet speak; he wears his rue with a difference. Art is a great consoler, because its source is happiness, and the grief that becomes lyrical wakes echoes in far-distant places. One cannot but remember the mourning of another desolate mother—

"Grief fills the room up of my absent child.
Lies in his bed, walks up and down with me,
Puts on his pretty looks, repeats his words,
Remembers me of all his gracious parts."

"Arthur Henry was his name," the work concludes, and there is sense in the line. More imposing poems have had a worse ending. The chapel hymn-book is Mrs Tovey's literary model, and occasionally her verse catches an echo of the larger utterance of an early revival period—

"Happy are those who serve the Lord,
Who feel their Saviour nigh,
He'll never leave, He'll not forsake,
He'll guide them with His eye."

Mrs Tovey is a devoted supporter of the chapel on the common, and a zealous propagandist of those points of doctrine that bring the most practical consolation to the lives of the poor, where pain and age and sickness are unvarnished evils, deliverance from which comes with a relief hard to realise in other comfortably padded lives. A long illness in cottage homes too often means the hard facts of bad ventilation in a fireless room, or crowding in a noisy living room, gloomy windows, hard beds, long weary hours without distraction, continual labour and drudging of nurses, careful indeed and tender but sadly overworked, many ills, and much discomfort. Sickness and old age are definite calamities to the poor, and the strength that brings men to fourscore years is too often labour and sorrow if they are become a burden on those who feed and shelter them. The lives of labouring folk have few illusions. The facts of existence are literally taken, and release from pain and the narrow ways of poverty and the burden of age is really a happy release, which the immense consolation of the Burial Service brings home to them very clearly. So that the elegies which Mrs Tovey composes are cheerful in tone and flow readily. The pastor of the chapel com-

peted with her on one occasion, but Mrs Tovey took an easy first. "But I cann't make nought," she says, "for they as hevn't gone in peace." The tragedies of the village lie beyond the sphere of her happy Muse. She does not write her verses; they come into her head and bide there, she says; and she goes about her busy ways with another life, the happy life of the artist, stirring in her brain. Her husband, who is of a practical turn and does not read Sir Thomas Browne, listens to her praises with qualified approval. "Some likes it, sartin," he says; "I'm for the Word." The moments Mrs Tovey finds most favourable for composition are those in which her hands are busy and her mind comparatively free. Churning does not stimulate poetry, but she "thinks of a power of things" while she is fetching water from two fields away. "Lodge immaterials in thy head, ascend unto invisibles," said the philosopher; and unless people's heads are filled with wholesome things, whether housekeeping or philosophy, they are apt to accumulate dust and beetles like empty cupboards. Fetching water, in a village ill supplied with it, is regarded as an unqualified nuisance by most housewives; but Mrs Tovey finds it a convenient occasion for ascent to the happy region of invisibles whence she brings back her verses. They are much admired in the village, these works, because they speak a language "understanded of the people," and the quaint form conveys a great deal

to those who are accustomed to their manner and understand their subject. Truth, after all, is the first essential of all art. The best of Mrs Tovey's poems never went to press. A child of hers died at four years old, and the night after he was buried the mother made her song. It was much like the others in style, but there was a rare phrase embedded in it. "The Almighty called his soul away," ran the lines, "*The happy creature heard.*" There is real beauty there. The phrase brings illumination; its maker knew the quality of happiness. The line has the ring of true poetry because of its hold on reality; it is a bit of the universal language that is understood by all ages and all nations. The deep-down instinct of faith calls through to other faithful souls, just as the gallant spirit in "Chevy Chase" called through to the fighting instinct in Sir Philip Sydney, so that "I never heard the old song of Percy and Douglas," said he, "that I found not my heart moved more than with a trumpet."

Neither poetry nor piety can be smothered by any amount of incongruities; while the sentiment is vital it is to a great extent independent of externals, as a gentleman is independent of the cut of his clothes. Scottish congregations absorbed in the praises of the Creator used to sing with fervour, unruffled by any misgiving—

"Ye whales that in the waters move,
Your Maker's praises spout.
Ye codfish on the banks that leap
And lash your tails about";

and it is credibly related that devout women at zenana meetings in the early "fifties," acting on the conviction that Satan had no right to all the cheerful tunes, used to sing a hymn beginning, "I'd be a missionary, yes, I would labour," solemnly through to the tune of "I'd be a butterfly born in a bower."

Some fortunately gifted people have, like the wagtail, a natural grace of execution that is infinitely charming; while others spend a lifetime labouring after an ideal of elegance and finish that they never reach. And there are others, again, who cherish an ideal that could never be guessed from the atrocities they produce, just as some noisy, inglorious Joachim may spend his life torturing a fiddle to his own apparent satisfaction. With all three the creative instinct starts from the same point. The maker makes his art, as the wagtail invented his dance, purely for the pleasure of doing it.

LOCAL ANTIQUITIES

It all began with Obed Pearce taking it into his head to build himself a house up on the common. Nobody could imagine what possessed Obed to be "messin' about wi' they girt stwoneses" at the beginning of his sixtieth year, when it would have been more becoming to start preparations for mansions in the skies. But then Obed had always been "quare" in his notions, and what were you to expect from a man who habitually talked to himself? Captious persons used to say that this reprehensible habit brought the rain down, and certainly it always seemed to rain when Obed was about to load hay. But he never had any luck in anything. Obed had never married, presumably because he had not wanted to, and he shared a house with a married nephew who owned eight children. After sharing it for fifteen years, he might be supposed to have got used to the arrangement; but whether it was that Obed's ideas required time to mature, so that the heath-cottage theory was not ripe until he reached his sixtieth year, or whether he had grown tired of the constant society of

"infants clamorous whether pleased or pained," or whether he was one of those people who never seem convinced that they are right until some one tells them they are wrong, at all events he started building that house, and he made a further and still more shocking departure from local custom by omitting to lay a silver sixpence in with the foundation-stone. This omission naturally promised ill-luck from the outset; but it was no use arguing the point, for Obed talked to nobody but himself. He went on working away, hauling and digging like some laborious elderly mole, until the foundations of his house were laid; and then Obed died one day without giving anybody warning, and had no longer any need of houses made with hands.

They stood bare for a long time, those queer solid ground-works, and then time and the wind and the natural course of things began to absorb them very slowly into the character of the common. The heaps of dug-out soil became overgrown with short, close grass, and the furze seeded and grew up in little thorny tufts all over the cracks of the mortar; and when the tufts grew into bushes, and grass and bracken covered all but the topmost stones, the foundations of Obed's house looked as if they had never been anything but a natural development of the common's timeless age.

All this happened a very long while ago. The

unaccountable whim of Seth Pearce's "big-uncle" Obed only lingers in the memories of the oldest generation. None of the children can tell you what the big round heap on the common is, and none of their fathers can remember seeing sails on the disused windmill that stands a gunshot away from it. Nobody but Obed ever would have dreamed of building anything but a mill up in that windy place. Every wind of heaven sweeps the golden loneliness of the common; on stormy days you would say they all blew together in a general frenzy. Since the windmill was reduced to the footing of a mere living-house the dwellers in it have planted a screen of gaunt thorn-trees on the seaward side, because the fiercest wind blows from that direction, and all the trees lean away from it, so that the place looks storm-blown even when the breeze is slight, though that happens seldom. There used to be a weather-duck before the door, who swung serene among the whirl of elements with the unmatchable complacency of his feathered prototype, fitfully intelligent with the gleam of a sphinx-like eye when the wind swung him broadside on. He is gone now, and there is a fine new painted fence all round the house and yard that looks much too modern and prosperous to have any right at all on the common.

When Obed's whim was well out of mind some

fifty years after his death, the manor house was sold and the land divided, and a new squire came to live there. The squire's wife said that that mound looked very like a barrow, and the squire said he would get Professor Jones to look at it the next time he came on a week-end visit. It is a melancholy truism that the issues of great questions are often determined by trifles. Wansdyke lies far from a town, and it is difficult to get a constant supply of fish; and Professor Jones's moral organisation was seriously impaired because his salad had been made with tinned lobster. So when he got up to the top of the common, and his hat had been blown off once into a furze-bush and once into the pond, the Professor looked at the "barrow" and uttered a sound between a snort and a growl. "Windmills, of course," said he. "What else did you expect to get up here?" and he got the early train the next morning without reconsidering his verdict. But it takes more than that to daunt the irresponsible amateur of archaeology, and since the whole range of the Mendips is a treasure-house of antiquities, local enthusiasm felt it would go hard if Wansdyke was to share in none of the glories. So not very long after this, through the influence of two or three ardent spirits, a local branch of research was formed at a neighbouring centre, and all the surrounding parishes were ransacked by enthusiasts with Ordnance maps and unbridled

imaginations. The dates of church towers or belfry inscriptions are tolerably safe material even for the most impassioned, but etymologies and Roman remains present fewer limits to restrain soaring flights of fancy. Such, in consequence, were very popular for a time among local Camdens, until the Roman occupation theory received a rude check when a discovery was made near the village street half a mile below Obed Pearce's "barrow." It was here that an active and leading member of the club was pursuing investigations with regard to a large flat stone of suspicious appearance that stood up all by itself in the middle of Ben Weaver's field without any plausible excuse to offer for being there. Stepping backwards to get a better focus of the suspected stone, the active member's left leg went abruptly right through a harmless-looking patch of bramble close by, and the member barely avoided turning a back somersault bodily into the middle of the patch. By exerting remarkable agility, he escaped with a scratched gaiter and a stimulated imagination. Poking through the brambles, he found that they half concealed a pit, a pit of moderate depth, round, and showing traces of cement—a very suspicious pit, that was clearly not a shaft, and was as clearly in mysterious collusion with the big stone. The Mendip country is riddled with shafts sunk by the Romans for lead, worked later by Somerset men,

and often carelessly covered over. Sometimes a lawn will sink because it has been laid over the rudely covered mouth of such a shaft, deep enough to swallow a house. But this pit was no shaft. The active member called the club's attention to it, and the next meeting was settled and the brambles cleared with amazing celerity. The pit looked most promising, and the eye of faith could very nearly discern order in the configuration of the surrounding meadow. The assembled party debated long and eagerly; there was much discussion, heated arguments, and a few sceptics who said it was a duck-pond; but there are always people in these societies who have no historic flair. One current of opinion set strongly towards the Roman occupation of Wansdyke; but then, granting that the Romans dug that pit, nobody could agree what they dug it for. Other theories were in favour of the Danes, others still of the Saxons; invading races were bandied about like shuttlecocks; some desperate fanatics began persecuting neighbours with etymologies, and conventions were becoming strained in some quarters. . . . It was at this point that the oldest inhabitant looked out of the window.

This window was a small pane at the back of the fireplace which had the advantage of presenting a view down the length of the steep street, whereas the legitimate windows only

looked across the way. Observing through the smoke-dimmed pane a crowd collected in "Girt-Mead," the oldest inhabitant pondered over it for a while. Crowds are an unusual spectacle in Wansdyke. "There'm nobody don't want to be put i' the dirt as I've heerd on, so it cann't be a buryin'," said he at length; and then he reached for his stick and hobbled out to see. He had very large boots and a very solemn face, with patches of white hair scattered over it. He looked as if he had forgotten most things, and certainly had forgotten how to laugh. He went slowly, partly because he was very old, and partly because you do not hurry when you have reached an age at which life holds no more surprises. When he got up to the archaeologists they had left off all talking at once, and the gentleman who had tumbled into discovering the pit was reiterating his theory that it had something to do with the big stone, and both belonged to the Roman occupation of the country. The words were long and the accent unprovincial, and the oldest inhabitant soon lost the thread. Presently his eye turned towards the subject of inquiry lying open to the light of day clear from its accustomed brambles. He hobbled towards it, and his ancient countenance lit up with a momentary gleam of reminiscence. "Eh-h," said he, addressing nobody in particular, "I mind, I do,

when they did dig thiccy pit to fight cocks in" . . .

Local research occupied itself for several meetings after that with domestic architecture of the fourteenth century, of which Somerset affords some remarkably fine examples, and has the additional advantage of possessing nobody old enough to "mind the biggin' o't."

THE LUCKY BIRD

He perched on a bough close by, and sang a beautiful little ballad right through, keeping the tail of his eye upon his audience all the while. He had clearly selected that bough with an eye to effect, for it was a long untidy twig straggling away all by itself from the thorn tree that owned it, and rising up with an amazing daintiness into the soft clear sky. He stood with his feet very far apart, and his bright red waistcoat thrown forward in a manner that emphasised the redundancy of his stout little person. When he had finished his song he lighted down again on the grass with an absolutely silent movement of his wings. Most birds make some sound in their flight, either clap, or flutter, or half-audible beating, but robin redbreast moves as noiselessly as a spirit. Not that his air is particularly ethereal, for there is a charming pert complacency in his gait that is half run like a finch and half hop like a sparrow, and when he manœuvres his balance the flirt of his tail is inimitable.

Why has the redbreast got an ill name in the West of England, he who should be of all birds the luckiest? Both in fact and fiction he has

been from time immemorial the friendliest creature to man. His instinct is to haunt human habitations, to trust man, and to live near him. He is the tamest of all our wild birds; indeed, he never needs to be tamed, for he comes to study you before you realise he is there to be studied himself. If there is a school of humanity in any bird academy, robin is the professor thereof, for he has a profound interest in all things pertaining to man and the true scientist's disregard for peril in pursuit of his subject. He never seems to anticipate danger from anything human, and his candid faith would disarm the rankest cynicism. Not that he is indiscriminate in his attentions, for a robin can show preferences as well as a Professor. Indeed, when in the summer workmen were building in Wansdyke for many weeks, the robin who always presided over their meals in a coach-house showed a marked preference for a certain mason. All the men fed him, and he was friendly with them all; but for this mason he had an especial regard, and wherever the man went the robin was in attendance.

The world over, where the redbreast inhabits "all men who know him call him brother" by some familiar name of affection, Thomas, Peter Robin—the friendliest of protecting names to poor folk of old time, who had less to fear from an outlawed than from a crowned robber. Yet in the

West, if he comes into the house, some of the countryfolk will tell you he heralds death. How can this blessed creature bring ill-luck? "The robin and the wren Are God's cock and hen," says the nursery rhyme. Certain birds have been voted ominious from time immemorial by a common instinct of mankind—ravens, owls, magpies, birds all strange to human habitations, and rarely seen; sinister in their crying and in their aspect too, if you only look for grace and beauty as the early world did. But all the traditions of the robin are beneficent; his breast is dyed with Love's own colour, and he sings year-through when other birds are chary of their praises. Even the thrush is rarely heard in December; and although any stray gleam of sunshine starts the little wren a-singing, yet robin is a sure prophet of fine weather, and when you hear his small shrill pipe uplifted from a high place then you may be certain of at least one fine day. When all the larks and finches are silent, whom should we make more welcome in our houses than the "tame ruddock," the bird

> "that loves humans best,
> That hath the bugle eyes and rosy breast,
> And is the yellow autumn's nightingale"?

Cannot this dread of the robin be due to some false analogy, such as crops up continually in

language, and passing over of some other bird's ill name to this innocent creature? Or has it really got a foundation in the prejudice that besets the minds of ignorant people, who misdoubt anything they do not understand?

A little while since, a robin came into a house in a West Country village and would not leave it. Day after day he came, fought his reflection in the mirrors, thereby doing much harm to fragile ornaments, and went perpetually into all the rooms. The master of the house died very suddenly, and the housefolk were convinced that the redbreast had brought the message of death. For two days the coffin lay in the church —a mile away—and all that time a robin was there too, flitting round everywhere, refusing to go out by open door or window, and setting up his shrill pipe among the shadows. A robin's appetite is proverbial, and there was little food to be got in the church; but there the bird stayed, certainly for hours, and to all appearance the whole time.

Now some part of the redbreast's quaintness is due to his habit of going much alone, as if, disregarding the claims of kind, he preferred the company of human mortals. Though he is the most devoted parent to his babies when they are hatched, yet he will drive them away when they are still very young, and it appears to be the young robins who migrate. The shy bullfinch

is always met in pairs; and out of the pairing season, finches, skylarks, linnets, tits congregate in flocks; but robin seems as if he wanted to share his life with man. It is a mysterious thing, the life that is shut up inside this little frame of a bird. Small wonder that in the old days, when Nature was a power to be viewed with dread and reverence, men thought these winged creatures brought messages from the unseen, and connected the flight of the bird across your path with the crossing of a certain invisible winged Power who had your fate in his hands. It is so hard to get an intimate knowledge of birds; they have their life in an element not our own. When we handle them dead we can only tell race, species, the shape of bones, and what the bird has in his crop; and when we watch them living how much there is to baffle us in individual movement, character, instinct, all that makes up the incommunicable mystery that is the life of a wild thing. The little familiar winged creature who flits like a shadow out of the hedge, and perches so lightly, looking at you sidelong with wise bright eyes, how are you to say that all that animation is meaningless, made to be trodden out in the dust; that robin is an intruder, with no part in the hidden life that mortality only reaches through dissolution?

In the early days, before the mysteries of faith had been challenged by the mysteries of science,

the strange beauty of birds flying impressed itself on the minds of primitive people, and although the stiff sense of the practical reduced even this to rule, as in augury, yet it never overpowered the indefinable attraction that the fluttering of birds when they "fly as a cloud" has for humanity bound down to one element by the limitations of a wingless and webless anatomy. It was no idle fancy, but a wise instinct, that made the old primitive weavers of patterns and moulders of ornament take birds to symbolise the hidden life, so deep is the sense connecting the immortal lightness of man's soul with the winged grace of these flying mortals. It was more than a freak of scholarship that made another poet call the nightingale "the dear good angel of the Spring."

For, after all that bird students can tell you about the redbreast, and his immense appetite, his ferocity, his uncertain migratory habits, and his affection for ourselves, they cannot tell you why his minute personality impresses you so seriously. He comes close and looks at you with bewitching bright eyes, but you will never quite understand him. It is as if Nature were perpetually telling you a secret with her mouth at your ear, but you cannot hear the words of it. The dull sense of humanity can only translate the silent message of bird-life into "good luck" or "ill luck." The wistful human eyes are blind to that hidden wisdom that is so near, like a

messenger who is at hand and yet distant from you by the breadth of eternity. There are things about Nature that natural science cannot fathom, and yet "it is but opening the eyes" and they might be there, like the sudden vision of winged splendour that came once on a time, when there were shepherds abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.

PARADISE

It is not very far from the place where the old palace used to stand ; but that has been gone a long while. You can get into Paradise from the high road by turning down a grassy lane ; but the best way is to follow the brook for a little, and then go through a certain steep meadow crossed by a quavering foot-track that appears to lead straight into a hedge, and then disclaim further responsibility with the traveller. But that is only make-believe, for there is really a moss-grown, tottering stile hiding between two thorn-bushes. You must get over with caution, because on the further side the ditch is spanned by an infirm green plank ; but when you are safe past that there is no more trouble about the way, for the two little paths that pretend to twist right and left really take you the same way, and that is into Paradise.

It is only a lane ; but then Somerset lanes have possibilities that are far to seek in the thoroughfares of more progressive districts. If you want to know Somerset you do not keep to the turnpike road. When you wander across country among the fields of the Mendips, you are con-

tinually coming upon hamlets hidden in corners of the hills. They have an unreclaimed air, as if History had mislaid them here some centuries ago, and forgotten about them ever since. These places are full of memories and the sentiment of things gone by. The past seems to have a personality here, like a cheerful ghost basking in the sunshine, waiting until the workaday world shall slip out of being and become part of it; but it is a benevolent ghost, and does not try to play the bogey. Round about these hamlets there are many ancient roadways, disused and forgotten now, since they once belonged to conditions long dead and passed away. The original purpose of roads was to lead from homestead to homestead, and now that many of the old homesteads have dropped out of being, you can still trace the ways of past generations in the deserted lanes that you stray into by chance, and that lead you from nowhere in particular to some place "familiar with forgotten years," like the lane that begins in a field and leads you into the neighbourhood of a fine Elizabethan manor, now a farmhouse, standing up solitary on a green mound above green pastures on the site where, earlier still, King John had a hunting lodge. It is so still and so lonely that you almost wonder how you fail to meet an archer there.

But Longthorn Lane is some way from Paradise, which latter brings you near the Druid

circle. It is a narrow red lane deep-sunk between high banks and great hazel-bushes that meet overhead in Midsummer, and cover the warm red earth at noon with a beautiful dappling pattern of dancing sunlight. It flickers continually with the light movement of the hazel-leaves and bewilders the eyes with its changeful lights, for the sunshine is fairly imprisoned in this narrow space, because the path rises in a long slope, and disappears suddenly at a bend, so that it seems to run away and end itself among the fugitive green shadows of the hedge. It is wonderfully silent, and the sunshine dances as if all the life of the world had slipped away and become light embodied in this still place.

Near the beginning of Paradise there is a small house with a garden round it, but the walls are broken now, and the garden has run wild with willow and thistles and broad-leaved burdock. This is the Kennels, and the hounds used to be kept here. The lane is broader and the hedge lower than it is farther on, and there is a long stretch of elder full of blossom filling the air with its heavy scent. Elder and may-blossom look like enchantment, with their wide, close expanse of flat-lying blossom that might hide things spellbound. Perhaps it was the close, heavy scent of the elder-flower that made a whistling bird on the other side of the hedge sound mysterious, but when the two of us turned back

from the deserted house to pass the stretch of pale blossoms it was like the effort of grasping something in a dream, that half awakens the dreamer as the desire grows.

How the thing whistled! It was like a blackbird, but with the spiritual quality of flute-music, that seems as if the instrument were drawing the notes through its small reed-compass straight out of another world, so that the sense grasps the music but can never reach the beginning of it. And it was not quite the lyric passion of song incarnate that is the bird-carol, for there was a quiver of something like human pathos in it, a sober gaiety, like a thing delivered from peril, which, remembering pain passed by, rejoices in the fulfilment of peace. There was a long whistle, and a trill, and a few quick notes, then a soft gurgling interval, as if the piper fingered the stops very gently, and then came the long, flute-like whistle again. You could not guess where the happy thing might be hidden, for the sound seemed to come through the elder-trees; but when you came close it was just as far away as ever, and yet never very far, and always on the sunny side of the hedge. Nothing was to be seen inside the hedge but the cool green shade of the great branches; beyond was a wide meadow full of loneliness and sunshine. Still the piping went on. The Brown Brother wagged his stump of a tail and looked well pleased,

but he could not say where the voice came from. So we went along the lane towards the rising part where the leaves meet overhead, and when we had got into the dappled sun-shadows the piping stopped.

Paradise is an unfrequented place because it is too narrow for carts to pass. Nobody who goes through Paradise ever has any business there. So we went along all alone until the banks of hazel ended and the path rose up again to the level of the fields, and at the end of the bushes we met a very old man. He was walking feebly, as if all his years were a burden lying on his bent shoulders: an old, old figure in a shabby coat, leaning on a bent old stick, and bowed together with age and weakness. He looked very like one of the gnarled green pollards in the hedge that have got twisted out of shape by the West wind. When he looked round and saw the pair of us he smiled, and then he stopped and smiled again, and his old face seemed to disappear for a moment beneath a network of innumerable wrinkles. The Brown Brother, who has no manners, jumped up and pawed him, and had to be apologised for; but the old man patted his brown head and smiled again. "You'm come droo Paradise, zimly," said he. "A many dogs there wer' back along to wold times when I did used to bide there. Wold volk an' wold pleäces, they don't return no mwore for all the sad hearts that do mind their

passin'. But there'm things what don't niver pass and them that's a-gone can mind."—"Who lived in the old house?" the Brown Brother's companion asked him.—"Dogs," said he, "hounds and th' huntsman, old Ben Weaver an' his lame maiden wi' her feäce like a vlower. All dead and gone now they be, wi' their jays an' their pains—nay, what do I say, there'm jays what don't niver pass by." He blinked his weary old eyes while he went on fondling the dog. "Birds do zing there," said he, "rare an' sweet. I do mind when Ben's maid did meäke tunes so sweet's a bird wi' her little reedy-pipe. There were niver such a maid for gladness as Ben's lame maiden." He went on talking as if he dreamed. "All the creeturs o' the e'th, her did love so's if her'd a' had share i' the meäkin' o' them. Not a dog o' th' pack but did go crazy vur to be vondled o' she. And another there wer' volks did say wer' nigh crazy vur to wed wi' the maid, niver so lame as her were. Raison zure, vur her wer' witty beyond most, as them oft be what's afflicted. An' to hear un whistle i' the zunshine wi' her little pipe, as tho' her wer' a very bird! . . . But he wer' son to a great leädy, and couldn't a' zet by his greatness vur Ben's lame maiden. They'm dead now, all dead an' gone."—"Did she die because of that?"—"Nay," said the old man; "I don't think. Why should maids die because men be vond? Her did die, and they'm all dead

since, nigh fowerty year a-gone. But if zo be as the dead can mind past gladness, they'd come back zure to rejoice vur sorrow passed over. Such a maid for jay niver wer' o' this e'th ; too much jay I do reckon vur that her could endure our burdens, vur they'm zore when we do grow wold. 'Twill be the better vur I when the Lard do take I, but do zim He'm not ready yet. Happen them that know did take the maid before her could vind the burden o't. But I do think when I do hear the birds a-pipen' that glad hearts gone must see their past jays an' be all the gladder vur the pain passed by and gone."

DUCKS

The duck is a person who seldom gets his deserts. Some centuries ago Chaucer blasted his character, and he has never since got it properly repaired. This is hard, for there is much solid worth in the duck, and his gait is inimitable. The Magnanimous Man was known by his going; so also is the duck. Independence, the inquiring mind, the deliberation of one whose reflections are worth the name, consideration for the solidarity of the flock, and a profound study of the doctrine of the main chance—all this is expressed in the decorous waddle of the duck. The cock, though a personable bird, is a braggart and a booby; but the duck is a humourist; his inimitable complacency cannot be ruffled because he sees through the shows of things, and the gleam in his beady eye tells you so.

"Parson" is a slave to a brigade of Aylesbury ducks, called collectively Billy. And Billy—collective—tyrannises over his owner with the remorseless tyranny of the so-called dumb animal. But there is that in the character of Billy which deserves eulogy, for the wisdom of ages has not yet exhausted the merits of the duck. We all

know the goose. In history, and in letters too, he has left his mark. He saved the Capitol; he winged victorious shafts at Creçy and at Agincourt; he winged other shafts than those before the steel pen was invented; he is of vast importance in fairy-lore; and in the ancient lay of Gudrun he was touched with an exquisite homely pathos when the Sagaman told how the geese in the home-field fell a-screaming as the Queen wept for Sigurd slain on her knees. But the possibilities of the duck are also numerous, and there is no sweeter creature alive than a duckling lately hatched. The alacrity, the intelligence, the charming clumsiness, of his every movement, the abundant vitality in his minute person, the lovely colouring and the sweet, happy voice, make a young duckling one of the most charming creatures on earth. In the young beauty of green branches and blue sky and delicate blossoms the yellow heads of a toddling brood add a perfect note to the mysterious tune that Spring plays on the Pan-pipes. Or at the other end of the year's march you may rejoice if you have the fortune to see a late-hatched brood of golden ducklings among the deeper gold of drifted October leaves nestling together in the sweet contentment peculiar to these little creatures, who are never querulous, never quarrel, and never grumble at their food. Now and then a pair of splay orange-coloured feet will go paddling

over the crackling leaves, and some enthusiast will overbalance his small, unsymmetrical person in a desperate attempt to catch a belated wasp; and then you have got another of Nature's harmonies.

Heaven lies about us in our infancy, ducks as well as men; but it cannot be pretended that the domestic duck grown up into the shades of the prison-house is an exalted character. Indeed, he is a materialist, and where dinner is concerned he is certainly greedy. But he is of a type for which an unheroic world that is always demanding heroism is seldom sufficiently grateful. He is very like the average man. Let us be thankful for the ordinary man. Without him the extraordinary would not be. The domestic duck derives immediately from the wild duck, or mallard, who abounds in our marshes and riverlands. A charming creature he is, and a singularly clever one, as you can judge from the cunning hiding-places he chooses for his nest: sometimes half-a-mile from the water, to evade the vigilance of foxes, who judge that his breeding-place should be near his feeding-place, and whose calculations are baffled by his astuteness. Sometimes, though essentially not a roosting bird, he will even nest in a tree, and thus be obliged to carry his young somehow to the water whither instinct drives the parents with the new-fledged brood. And in distinction from the barnyard duck, who is a regular Mormon, the mallard is

monogamous, even to keeping one mate for life, so certain authorities maintain. Sad it is that the duck should have declined upon materialism in his days of prosperity; but it is a phenomenon not confined to ducks. Modern man also has cast away certain romantic virtues of old time—perhaps they are too cumbrous for a hurrying life, like the armour of the period. It was the domestic duck that Chaucer knew, not the mallard, who, being himself a "changeless lover," would not have flouted the "wedded turtle with her heart true" pleading in praise of constancy. "'Well jested,' quoth the duck, 'by my hat'!" And his argument was reasonable. Ideals are uncomfortable things, said he; take the thing that you get most comfort out of—

> "'Yea quack,' yet quoth the duck, both well and fair,
> 'There be more stars, God wotteth, than a pair.'"

It may be that a sense of humour is not always compatible with the highest virtue, and the duck has a humorous eye; but looking into it, you may misdoubt him for a rascal!

But he is a pleasing bird, and has his merits. He is, moreover, a bit of a Socialist; that is to say, he is collectively greedy. This is probably a wild trait, for individual greediness appears to be a vice of civilisation. Give a savage child by Lake Nyasa a biscuit, and if he has nineteen

companions standing by, he will break his biscuit into twenty bits instead of devouring it alone, like Greedy Dick of nursery fame. Ducks feed together, sleep together, steal together, play together, live harmoniously in a flock. Whom he knows and what he is used to the duck tolerates; but no strangeness will he suffer. Go through an unknown doorway or along an unfamiliar track he will not except under dire compulsion, and then only with loud protesting and reproach. In like manner many householders, mistrusting the snares of experiment, refuse to change the scene of their yearly holiday; and like the average man, too, the duck is a slave to prejudice—what he does not like is wrong, and what he does not understand is much worse. Among the Parsonage brood there was a drake suspected of murdering a meritorious hen solely because he objected to her colour. It was unlike his family's, so he slew her. At any rate, after a life of persecution from this drake the unfortunate hen was found a draggled corpse floating in the duck-pond, while the suspected murderer, with a weird gleam in his inscrutable eye, swam round and round quacking to himself in an undertone. But in spite of prejudice, ducks are wise creatures. You see it in their habits, their games, their stringent code of etiquette. They have a tolerance born of wisdom. The drakes in a flock seldom or never fight as cocks will fight; they will

persecute strangers, but they tolerate their kind.

It may be doubted whether the tame duck ever pines after the wild, free life of the mallard whom he hears so often passing overhead. He has acquired enough philosophy to know when he is comfortable, and you could fancy his eye gleaming with a subtle malice as he considered the difference between the beautiful wild freedom of the mallard who depends on cunning and courage for very life, and the comfortable, safe, humdrum existence that brings him his own daily corn in a bucket. Ducks are not as unlike men as men suppose. "There be more stars, God wotteth, than a pair," is no uncommon rule of life among human mortals. Has the mallard the better part? He suffers terrors and persecutions, he must be often cold and sometimes starving, few of the ordered certainties of existence fall to his share, his lot is poverty, and all his wealth is freedom—

> "A pilgrim bold in Nature's care,
> And all the long year through the heir
> Of joy or sorrow."

Twice every day, all the year round, a flock of wild duck crosses a certain hill, lying between two reservoirs about seven miles apart. In the winter the flock is enormously increased by hosts

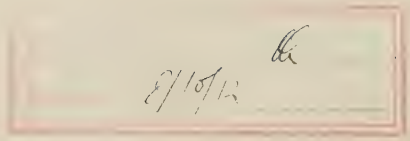
of immigrants coming to winter. They are always exact to time by the sun. In the grey light immediately before sunrise or after sunset they pass over a certain chestnut in the home-field, flying high up in a V-shaped body well out of gun-shot, for they know the hilltop holds foes, though how they manage to estimate the carrying power of a local gun is a mystery; but know it they do, and will not even scatter when fired at, but go past like a flash, with a swift whistling of wings as their wedge cleaves the air. And if the ducks below in the field should quack, from high overhead comes a shrill, attenuated "qu-a-a-a-k," as kindred answers kin, distant so far within the swathes and fetters of civilisation. So the deep-down irrational instinct in the heart of man leaps out sometimes, responsive to the imperious silent call of wild Nature. The homeless joy of free elements is the inheritance of these wild creatures, and the sophisticated may desire but he will not claim it. He has learned the difference between wealth and poverty, and it is all over with his freedom of choice; he is burdened with goods and shackled to expediency; he will never again trust the kindly severities of Nature.

The wild duck's richest inheritance is his poverty. Give him wealth and he is poor. He has acquired the sense of humour, but the revenues of the soul have shrunk. Some of the keenest joys, and possibly certain of the purest

virtues, disappear when life becomes too comfortable. How much do we lose by the exchange?

The hen-wife at the Parsonage has a new sister-in-law, a delicate girl hardly able to work for herself, who had been left a widow with two babies. She married again shortly, "and there was folks," said Mrs Hawke, "as did say her hadn't ought hev' wed again. And sure her might hev' gone on the Parish. But there'm Isaac willing to keep her, so where be the raison on it? say I." "Yea quack—" There was sound sense in her reply!

THE END



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